

... in
Wonderland



This issue is dedicated to Alice, Snickers Earp . . .



. . . and the Elgin Clock Company.



alpha continuum 2

ALPHA CONTINUUM #2 ("...in Wonderland") is available from Marty Siegrist, 2311 Woodview Dr., Lansing, MI 48910. Cost: \$4.00 in person; \$5.60 first class; \$5.00 third or UPS; \$4.30 book rate.

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ARTISTS:

Paula Block; inside back cover
Gerry Downes; p. 33
Connie Faddis; p. 36
Amy Falkowitz; p. 22
M.J. Fisher; pp. 6,16,51, callig-
raphy pp. 5,7,11,23,26,37,69
Kathi Lynn Higley; pp. 63-67
Signe Landon; pp. 4,25,68
Gee Moaven; pp. 72,73,79,85,91,97,
99,100,105,111,133,139
Richard Schultz; pp. 151-154
Marty Siegrist; anything not
otherwise credited...

TYPIST: Mary B. Keast
with some assistance from:
M. Siegrist, T. Henry, I. Cross

Printed by: University Printing, MSU
Cover printed by: Lightning Litho,
Lansing, Michigan



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the time has come.

The walrus said, "to talk of many things", and while I have no affinity for discussing shoes, sealing wax or cabbages, there are a few things I'd like to talk of here. This, in case you hadn't noticed already, is the second issue of the former one-shot fanzine, *Alpha Continuum*. It's already about 50 pages over original estimates, and 27 over my so-called "final" estimate, so this editorial, which was going to be *very* long is instead going to be confined to one page. Count your blessings. My first official act in this editorial will be to apologize for not properly crediting some of the material in the first issue of *Alpha*, to wit: Valerie McLean's story, *Wings of Wonder*, was originally printed in the July, '75 newsletter of the *Star Trek* Correspondence Club in Norfolk, England; Cheryl Rice's story, *Never Enough Dark*, is reprinted from *That Which Survives*, which I believe was/is the S.T.A.R. Akron newsletter. Sorry, folk. In this issue, the drawing (by me) called "What's Up, Doc?" was first printed in the DeKAF newsletter last year, so if it looks vaguely familiar, that's why.

Having taken care of past credits, we can now move on to an intro to this issue of *Alpha*. The material contained herein is predominantly McCoy-oriented, with an occasional aside about De Forest Kelley tossed in for good (?) measure. (For those who are confused by references of the leporine variety, may I refer you to the *ST* episode, *Shore Leave*, and the movie, *Night of the Lepus*? Overdoses of these visual delights, and a commercial which shall remain nameless and revolting, bring on such attacks.)

You have undoubtedly noticed that this issue contains two *Diamonds & Rust* chapters, which comprise a goodly share of the zine. In case you're wondering where they go relative to other chapters already in print, they are Chapters Three and Four. Other segments of *D&R* have appeared in *The Other Side of Paradise*#2, *Tal Shaya*#3, *Alpha Continuum*#1, *Millennium* and *Warped Space*#20 & 23. I was going to include a brief synopsis of What Has Gone On Before, but have to forego that pleasure due to lack of space. (I would like to mention, however, that volume #1 of the collected *D&R* is scheduled to be published in September, '77 by Kzinti Press. If you're interested in reserving a copy, send \$2 and a SASE to Kzinti Press, P.O. Box 8554, Toledo, OH 43623. It should be a fascinating zine.) And between the *D&R* chapters and Anne Laurie's story, *No Child of Man*, I believe *Alpha*#2 can claim the rather dubious distinction of having the strangest "Joanna stories" in print. They make interesting reading.

Speaking of future plans (well, we are *now*), we're already figuring out what's going to happen with the next few issues of *Alpha*--assuming, of course, that we don't get thrown out of fandom for having printed this one. The next issue is to be the Spock-emphasis issue, and the editor of that one will be Tina Henry (me, I'm going to hibernate!); thereafter we plan to have a Kirk-emphasis issue, to be edited by Signe Jesson, and another general issue or two--one of which will be edited by Yours Truly, here, and which will be subtitled *...Through the Looking Glass*. (Well, I happen to like Lewis Carroll's books) And as if that weren't enough, a few of us are getting together to put out a satirezine that picks on fandom, to be called *The (ex-purgated) Jihad*. It ought to prove to be unique, if nothing else. If you're interested in any of this, write and let us know.

In closing (thank God!) this editorial, I'd like to thank a few folk who made publication of this lost cause possible: Mary Keast, who did almost all of the typing herewithin, and who didn't even once scream in frustration or throw a bottle of liquid paper at me when I brought her more stuff to be typed; Skeeter at the MSU copy center, who watched over the zine like a hawk as it was printed to make sure it came out right (endangering her life, limb and job in the process--MSU does not take kindly to perfectionism); Jack Mateer, my boss, for not firing me on the spot as I sat at my desk doing fanzine-work instead of office-work (patient man, that); the various highly talented contributors to this issue; and special thanks to all the folk who reserved copies of the zine, because without that support (both emotional and financial) this thing simply wouldn't have gotten printed.

But enough of my verbosity--I'm running out of page! Enjoy (but beware the Jabberwock).



CL. 20004715

Souvenir

L. Jeanne Powers

*Hate the times when I can't fall asleep
Right off.
Hate just lyin' there, noticin' how everything's
metal an' cold
Hate knowin' that Outside isn't grasses an' blue skies
Just black nothin'
With a few stars tucked up like Christmas decorations
Against the cold.*

I wish I were home.

*Home, where it's warm and lazy in the afternoon
Like a sleeping cat.
Home, where it's so pretty when that ol' sun ball
Falls off the edge of the earth
Home, where's dirt beneath my feet, all warm
And crumbly and alive, but
Home has too many memories
I don't want to have again.*

So I guess I'll stay awhile.



M. FISHER '16

Raison du partir

L. Jeanne Powers

Dear Father,

This is a letter that's long overdue.
An explanation of sorts. Oh, you've never
Said it aloud, never broadly hinted, but I knew--
In my heart of hearts I knew I was hurting you.
And it hurt me, too.

It wasn't that I wanted to, that I guarantee.
I never wanted to hurt either you or mother--
But I had to survive. Yes, I did it all for me.
You've had training in psychology,
Didn't you see?

It wasn't out of spite that I went away.
It wasn't an attempt to punish you--No,
I don't care what those stupid books have to say
About "hidden motives" or that crap--I don't play
Those childish games. Well, it may have influenced me in some way
I'll admit. Who can say?

But I love you, Dad. I really do. The problem is that I love Mom, too.
So I did what I had to do--I didn't stay with either of you.
Don't you see? I didn't leave from anger or hate, I left for a person
--me.

Love,

Joanna



Arianna McCoy stood rigid and uncaring as the dawning sun shed its first rays through the window of the condominium she shared with her husband. She only felt the churning of her stomach and the hard knot in her chest ... the emptiness. There was nothing left now -- nothing but Joanna.

Her Joanna ... her baby -- borne the old way ... the natural way, Len would say. He thought mightily highly of himself for having created that baby girl. A corner of Arianna's mouth curled upward at the thought. Mighty high! But nine months and a stretch on the delivery table had put the credit on the other side.

He seemed such a stranger now. What had they ever thought they had in common? Moving away from the window, she caught sight of the Imag-savr cube on the bookshelf. She picked up the cube, fidgeting over the control without using it. Locked inside were memories preserved in three-dimensional color -- memories of their courtship, marriage ... She slammed the cube back down on the shelf. "Til death do us part!" Len had insisted on including that in their vows. It was hollow now, though they had meant every word then. But Len would still stick to it -- if she would let him -- no matter what.

Arianna glanced around the room for what must have been the 100th time. All that was hers -- and all that was Joanna's -- was bundled up, ready to be moved to temporary lodging with a friend across the city. All that couldn't be taken this time was down the recycler -- no trips back for more belongings and possible confrontations like the night before.

Len had come in late -- as usual, not calling to let her know why or how long he would be late. She was waiting up for him -- and had been for hours -- at first keeping herself occupied with small tasks, but finally unable to concentrate on anything, because her imagination insisted on dredging up visions of his mangled body lying among scores of other and the twisted metal of a tram wreck somewhere.

When he finally stepped through the doorway, worry evaporated to cold fury, "Where have you been?"

He had just stared at her for an instant, his shoulders beginning to sag from the long hours he had put in and the fight he could see coming. He let the door close softly behind him and set his medical kit on a nearby table.

"I'm sorry, precious," the weariness in his voice pulled each syllable out into a slurred drawl as he bent to kiss her. "I'm really sorry ... but there was an emergency at the clinic ..."

"You didn't have to be there! That's Schmidt's problem."

Oh, for Chris' sake! McCoy choked back what he wanted to say, "He had a heavy caseload ..."

"So? ... let him call someone else."

He put his arm around her. Lightly kissing her ear, he began stroking the nape of her neck with his finger tips. "Now it's gonna be all right, precious ..."

"Don't you 'precious' me!" She pulled away from him, her eyes blazing. "You do that to me every-time I try to discuss something with you ... but you're not going to get away with it now!"

"For cryin' out loud!" he growled. "What do you want?"

Taken aback, Arianna felt the anger wash out of her. *What do I want? I want you to love me again, to spend more time with me. I want ...* "I want you to quit the clinic."

He shook his head violently, "No! I don't tell you how to manage your career ... so don't interfere with mine!"

"My career ...?! I passed up two very lucrative appointments this month so we could spend some time together on holiday with Joanna ... and where in hell were you? At your ... precious ... clinic!"

"They needed me!"

"And I don't! Is that it?"

"Blast it, Arianna! You're twisting what I said. I'm not your marionette!"

"I didn't ...," she said through clenched teeth, her voice beginning to waver near hysteria. "I didn't say I wanted that! I just ... I love you ... and you don't have time for me anymore ... not even for Joanna." She bit her lip in a vain attempt to hold back the tears that were beginning to roll down her cheek.



*When the good
is gone from
goodbye*

Karen Fleming

"Oh God!" Putting his arms around her, McCoy pulled her head onto his shoulder, crooning, "Precious, I'm sorry. I promise I'll try to cut back on the time I spend at the clinic."

"Try!" She wrenched herself away from him, her cheeks now wet. "You promised that ... over and over ... No more promises! Just quit!"

"Arianna! It's my profession ..."

"You have the partnership!"

"Hypochondriacs and hangnails! That's not my idea of practicing medicine!"

"And this isn't my idea of a marriage! Two separate people who just happen to exist under the same roof!"

"I said I'll try to spend more time with you ... blast it, I can't do more than that!" He sighed, shaking his head in disgust, "That does it; I'm done talking ... Come on. It's been a long day and the night's half over." He took her elbow to propel her toward the bedroom door, but she shook his hand off.

"Well, I'm not finished, because you haven't paid attention to anything I've said!"

McCoy just stood staring at her a second, his head tilted to one side. "That's just fine," he said in mock courtesy, "You go right ahead ... but you'll be talkin' to these walls. I'm goin' to go to sleep."

"No you don't!" As he turned toward the bedroom, she grabbed his arm, but he shrugged out of her grasp and continued into the room with her close behind. "You can't treat me like some old, worn-out shoe!"

"Oh, for Chris' sake! Are you gonna keep this up all night?"

"And the next night and the next ... until we come to an agreement!"

He just glared at her a second, then, stopping just long enough to pick up a fresh change of clothes, headed for the door as she followed hot on his heels.

"Where are you going?" A chill ran through her at the sight of the stubborn set of his jaw. And her voice became a wail, "Len, where are you going?!" But his only answer was to pick up his medical bag.

"Len!" At the sharp, bitter tone in her voice now, he turned one last time. "If you walk out that door now, Joanna and I won't be here when you come back!"

He had just drilled through her with his icy stare. "Stop being childish, Arianna! I'll come back when you've cooled off!" He had closed the door behind himself and was gone, his departing footsteps swallowed by the thick carpet in the hallway.

Now, the door chime shocked her out of her reverie. It was the taximan, come to take her away. In a flurry of activity that could never be more than a blur in her memory later, they carried the bundles down to the aircar and packed them in until there was room only for the driver and Arianna with Joanna sleepily sitting on her lap.

The sun was high in the morning sky now as Arianna felt more than saw the taxi lift off the ground and begin to slowly move out toward the traffic. Holding Joanna close, she tried to will back the drops of moisture that were forming in the corners of her eyes.

Something that had once seemed very beautiful and endless had only rotted on the vine. All that she had had -- all that she had wanted -- was gone, leaving only a cold, aching emptiness. No permanence, nothing solid to hold onto -- no time to link yesterday to tomorrow. Like a knife it cut through her -- exorcizing affection. He didn't know what it was like -- but he would, oh, he would, she swore ... until the day he died. He'd pay.

Change of Habit

Meg Hogue



McCoy was seated at his desk in his Sickbay office, putting the day's singularly uninteresting events into the computer files of his log. It occurred to him that it was either feast or famine on the *Enterprise*: either he was doing nothing at all or else he had a line of patients backed up out into the corridor. Not that he wished to see a few people wounded so he'd have something to do. He merely lamented the fact that there were so few things outside of his area that he could become involved in. Lately he'd felt particularly conspicuous on the Bridge, especially with Spock's poorly camouflaged remarks about there being nothing for him to actually do there either. He thought about the ever-growing collection of taped medical journals that had been accumulating in his desk drawer and scowled -- he didn't feel like wading through the dried descriptions of all the newest diseases and allergies and communicable fungi that had been viewed by his most illustrious colleagues of late. Most likely it would only serve to make him envious. Grudgingly, he reached for his coffee --

-- and knocked the cup to the floor when he heard the sound of crashing glass come from within the confines of the Infirmary. On his feet in a trice, he followed the sound of what seemed to be a stream of invective in a female voice.

Christine Chapel, the source of the invective, was on her hands and knees on the floor, muttering still, as she carefully picked up pieces of broken glass and placed them on a tray. She looked up at him and clamped her mouth shut tightly.

"Can I help?" he offered somewhat meekly. She did have a temper, but usually better-controlled, and there was one word there he didn't recall ever hearing her vocalize in all the years he knew her.

"No," she said, her expression softening slightly. "I don't know what happened." She began to resume her task as she continued. "I was going to put the beakers away and I dropped the tray when --" She gave a start and pulled back her hand. "Goddamned sonofabitch ..." She pressed her finger to her lips, then eyed the cut that was bleeding rather freely.

McCoy reached out and lifted her to her feet while she nursed the injured hand. "Here, let me." He walked her over to the examining table. "I really hate having those things around for just that reason but occasionally we get something that we can't put in the synthetic ones." He scrutinized her hand carefully and reached for the sanispray. "It's not very deep at all and you didn't get any glass in it."

"I know that," she snapped, then looked immediately solemn.

"Well, I'll bandage it and --"

"I can take care of it myself, Doctor. After all, I am a nurse."

McCoy tried to cover his surprise and failed somewhat. "All right, Miss Chapel." He made a vague gesture with his hands and walked back into his office, resisting the temptation to look back. What the hell had gotten into her all of a sudden?

Not so suddenly, he answered himself as he sat again. He had thought very little of it before but now that he brought it to mind, she had been a little ... edgy lately. Unrelated incidents ... he remembered walking in on a rather loud discussion she had been having with one of the new nurses ... he remembered the look on her face when he politely pointed out a minor error she made in a lab report ... there were other things, he recalled as well. He had chalked them up to a variety of things ... her attitude toward work, her pride in her own work, her time of the month that occasionally made her somewhat disagreeable because, unlike the other women aboard, she was allergic to the standard contraceptive injection and had to take a substitute that didn't balance hormones quite as well. Then there was her perennial problem: Spock. Or more precisely his lack of interest. However, none of these things ever really got the better of her; she prided herself on her self-control.

There were times when he felt a strange kind of empathy for her. It was difficult to be alone. It was a well-known secret that nearly everyone onboard had paired off, and for the sake of the relative sanity of the crew he worried very little about it. People need people -- that's a human constant and he was all for it. Now and then he lamented that he wasn't one of them. Neither was Christine.

Thoughtfully, he began to wipe up the spilled coffee.

Having just bolted down his toast and coffee, McCoy strode briskly to Sickbay, feeling mildly embarrassed. He didn't really have a fetish about punctuality but it was a point he often pressed, and to be late himself was at least uncomfortable. Damned chronometer ... He made a mental note to check with the supply master about a replacement.

Sickbay's doors slid open and he was confronted with two nurses and a corpsman as he entered. He smiled ruefully -- *no doubt they've waited en masse to remind me I'm late*, he thought. But the trio was surprisingly silent as he approached them.

"O.K.," he said, "I'm ready. Let it go with both barrels. I'm over an hour late. But," he grinned, "it's the first time in years."

Ensign Nikki Harris, an appreciably lush-looking redhead, folded her arms and bit her lower lip. Finally, "Oh, it's not that, Doctor. It ..."

"Well?" Now he was curious.

"It's Miss Chapel," Wade, the corpsman, volunteered. Then he looked at Nikki.

"It's her hair ..."

McCoy was approaching total confusion. "Her ...? Now come on, what's going on?"

Nikki took him by the arm and walked him to the door. "See for yourself. But don't say anything to her or she'll bite."

As McCoy left them, the three exchanged looks. Well, maybe that was the wrong thing to say, but the right thing failed to occur. Nikki had approached her and commented that it was flattering. Janet Waterbury, another nurse, after engaging in conversation and unaware of what Nikki had said, commented that she thought the other color was better. And all Wade did was look. All three had been met with comments so caustic they would have blistered paint.

Christine was to be found in one of the labs, diligently making notes, with a stylus and light board, to be fed into the computer. McCoy stood in the doorway and tentatively cleared his throat. She turned briefly, acknowledged his presence with a silent nod, and resumed her work. His eyes widened. Blond Christine Chapel was now a brunette ... and that dark hair was cropped about 2" long all the way around. She looked like an entirely different person.

He was of the opinion that women enjoyed compliments and so one began to take form in his mouth. He then thought the better of it when he considered the current temperament of the woman in question. But perhaps to avoid it would be just as irritating to her.

"Sorry I'm late," he ventured.

After a moment she turned to him again, said: "I hadn't noticed," and just as quickly resumed her work.

"Anything happen before I got here?"

"Nothing we couldn't handle." This time without turning to him.

Feeling as damned if he did as if he didn't, he inhaled and said, "You look very nice, Miss Chapel. I think the color is very attractive."

She faced him with an incredibly sweet smile. "Really, Doctor, I don't give a damn what you think," and once again presented her back to him.

He decided he definitely had to think about all this and turned to leave. Halfway to his office he heard a loud crash from inside the lab where Christine was working. He decided against turning to check it out. Nikki Harris was waiting by his desk.

"We tried to warn you." She offered him a consoling smile. "I don't know what's the matter with her lately. You know, she wouldn't even let me into the bathroom this morning until after she left for work. Since we've shared one for so long, we've always tended to dash back and forth and get ready together. I just don't know," she said, shaking her head.

McCoy didn't know either, but decided that for the welfare of all concerned and for the relative peace onboard, he had better check her medical files.

"I'm what?" She looked at him incredulously.

McCoy truly regretted having to tell her what he did. He had already thought about it for days and realized he shouldn't postpone it further. But the contemplation had made him see Christine as a truly tragic figure. He had known her for years now -- although it was cliched, they had indeed been through a lot together. She was more than an associate, she was an old comrad -- suddenly he winced at the word "old". And just as suddenly he heard the hollow echo of the loneliness in her life as loudly as he had that of his own. As a young woman she had dedicated herself to her work as a research biochemist. Then she had met Roger Corby, and loved him, and lost him, and eventually joined SF to look for him. What she had found when they discovered him, the android who had once been everything she had ever wanted in a mate -- well, it would've been better to have never found him at all. Ever-rational, she had adjusted her thinking to react just that way, as though they had never found him and that he was lost forever.

For reasons McCoy thought he would never understand, she had turned her attentions to Spock. Not that there was anything wrong with the Vulcan, technically ... but in its own way it was just as futile as waiting for Corby. That was the tragedy: *she's a nice person, McCoy mused, a genuinely good person, and she's spent her whole life waiting ... waiting for someone who will never arrive.*

"I said you're going into menopause," he said quietly.

She fussed with the hem of her skirt briefly, crossed her legs, and looked up at him. "Well, do they take me out and shoot me now or do I hang up an 'out of business' sign?"

"Now, you know it's not as bad as all that. Although we've advanced to the point where this stage of life comes later than it used to, some women still reach it early. It doesn't have to mean the end of your childbearing period, you know. There are drugs, implantations -- oh, you know, a lot of things." He was starting to feel extremely uncomfortable discussing this with her and wondered where his medical reserve had gone. After all, she was a patient. But she was also a friend, and he had always made a point of not treating friends, but how the hell do you manage that when you're living in close quarters with a few hundred friends you simply have to treat?

She looked cynical. "And just whom am I supposed to anticipate all this for? Spock? In case he has a change of heart? Assuming he has one, that is." She studied his face and seemed to resent what she found there. "Now don't look at me like that. I don't want your pity."

"It's not that," he countered.

"Then what is it? You can't fool me. I've known you too long. I know just what you're thinking." Suddenly she was on her feet and pacing. "Poor Christine, she's all alone. Poor Christine, she'll never see 35 again. Poor Christine, wasting her time chasing after someone she'll never catch." She paused and looked at him. "You know something," she seemed to be sniffing back tears. "That's the whole damned lousy trouble. It's true, every bit of it." The tears spilled and she tried to ignore them. "Do you know, I've been dyeing my hair for years now. My sister is a natural blonde and swears it has an effect on men. I've been waiting and waiting and nothing has happened. I gave up. Trouble is, now the grey hair will show." Trembling more than she cared to, she sat again, and reached for a tissue. Carelessly she dabbed at her eyes. "This is really very embarrassing," she said, trying to resume her dignity. "I swore I wouldn't do this in front of anyone."

"It's all right," he said, reaching to touch her shoulder lightly. "It's good to get it out."

"Maybe. Well, what's the verdict? You going to retire me?"

"Don't be silly. I'm going to run some tests and we'll find something to put you on to help the hormone balance stabilize. That'll help these ... er ... moods you've been experiencing. Because of your allergies it'll take some time, maybe even experimenting with a couple before we find one that works for you. But it's nothing to worry about."

"That's easy for you to say," she snapped.

Oddly enough, he thought, it isn't easy at all, even though I know it will work out. I wish I could figure out why.

For some reason, the episode with Christine had started him thinking about himself in retrospect. McCoy pulled off his shirt and turned down the covers on the bed. Not that it was anything he cared to indulge in with frequency. But he couldn't help but be reminded of how ultimately similar their situations were.

He had been married once. Arianna had indeed been a gem, and he had been proud to have won her, though later, he often wondered ...

His thoughts eddied back over the years: the dance where they first met, where they fell in love -- or something ... marrying despite opposition from her aristocratic family ... the position on the staff of the hospital where Arianna's father was Chief of Staff ... simultaneously continuing with his private practice ... the incredibly long, hard working hours ... trying so desperately to succeed, to gain acceptance ...

He took advantage of all opportunities that came his way -- and they were many ... years passed ... his work pace frantic, Arianna's lonely ... Joanna's arrival (*How'd she ever manage to be conceived, with the little time I spent at home?*) ... Arianna's loneliness alleviated only somewhat by Joanna's presence, but growing ever stronger when Joanna was sent away to girls' school ... arguments with Arianna over the amount of time he spent (*didn't spend?*) at home ... her increasing disillusionment, restlessness ... finally, her request for a divorce. He wasn't resentful (*whether from realizing how poorly I'd treated her or my refusal to allot the matter any precious time for concern? I don't really know ...*) ... he supported them, as was only proper ... lavished gifts on them when occasion required ...

Then came the year that Sanders Syndrome struck (*seems for every disease we manage to cure, another one, new and worse, springs up to replace it*) ... Arianna became one of its victims ...

McCoy working with the research teams to find a cure ... almost a holy crusade (*for humanitarian reasons, or to insure my place in the history records, I can't say ... who'd believe now that I could ever have been that mercenary?*) devoting all his energies to the research, while Arianna died alone, in the embrace of a sterile hospital ward ... and the cure for Sanders Syndrome was discovered six months later.

Joanna ... still off at school ... communicating only through correspondence, and then only rarely ... avoiding her father, The Doctor, who'd let her mother die alone ... (*well, outwardly at least, it balances -- you started out with nothing, and ended up with the same. And what a lot of pretty messes left in between.*) For the first time in years, he'd realized that if he saw her, he wouldn't know what to say to her, anyway, so it was just as well. He petitioned the Surgeon General of Starfleet for a space assignment, and wound up serving on the *Enterprise*. He'd managed to get away from everything and everyone, to try for the first time in his life to truly sort things out, decide where his values lay.

He hadn't given up on life, not entirely -- only on involvement. No, he corrected, that wasn't quite accurate ... he was very involved with what he was doing and the people he was doing it with, the *Enterprise* crew. They were his family now and frequently he felt almost fatherly to each of them -- God, even to Spock sometimes. These people were his friends, they liked him for just exactly what they saw, what he had become. Only three of them knew the truth about his past -- Kirk, Chantal, and Christine -- and it didn't matter to them. That had come to mean a great deal.

There was no paucity of women, not really, not for diversionary reasons. He missed Tonia Barrows since she transferred to another ship -- she had been witty, intelligent, hopelessly feminine, and frankly very good in bed. But when she'd left he had felt almost relieved to have her gone -- they'd been getting too close and he was caring too much in ways he didn't want to suffer through. There were others, the women in shore leaves, friends of Jim ... no, he wasn't really lacking anything.

Not much, he told himself, *just someone to give a damn whether or not you're alive or dead.* He shrugged mentally -- at least he'd leave no one mourning when he died. But somehow he felt there was going to be so little in between.

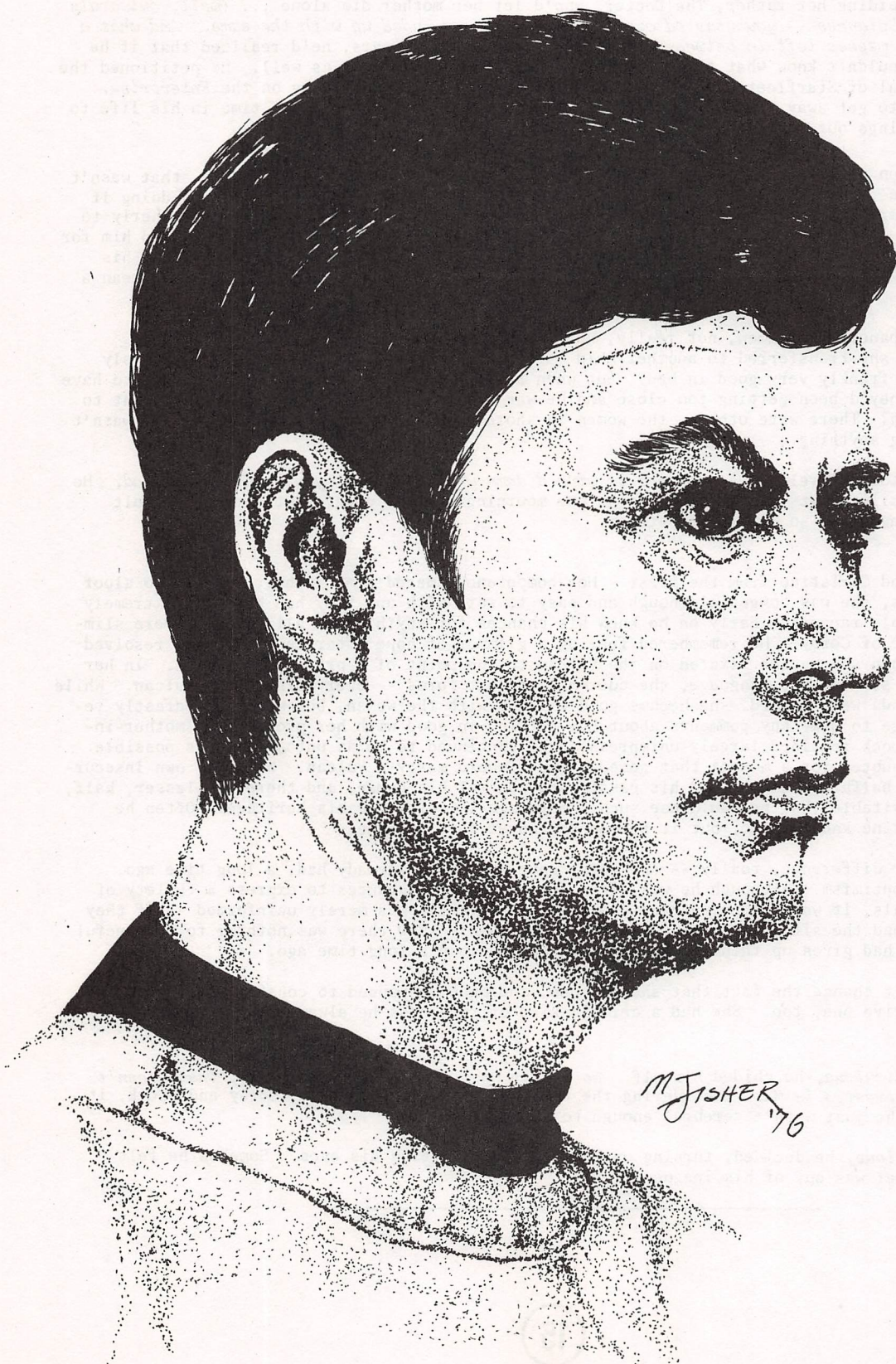
McCoy had liked Christine from the first. Her competency amazed him. Albeit a mite too aloof for his tastes, she was congenial enough and easy to work with and they had built an extremely strong, reliable rapport. Early on he knew his chances for anything at all with her were slim-to-nil because of Corby. He remembered feeling a glimmer of hope after that incident resolved itself, but then she became fixated on the Vulcan to the point of a private obsession. In her free time she studied the language, the customs, the art forms -- everything about Vulcan. While Sarek and Amanda were aboard, she became good friends with the woman, but McCoy steadfastly resisted the urge to make any comments about her getting in good with her prospective mother-in-law. Still Spock remained largely unimpressed and continued to be as untouchable as possible. McCoy never doubted for a moment that someday Spock would marry a Vulcan. With his own insecurity about his halfbreed nature and his passion to control his human, and therefore lesser, half, it seemed inevitable that he would use such a marriage to reinforce his heritage. Often he thought Christine knew it too, but it seemed she never gave up hope.

That was their difference, really -- she never gave up and he already had, a long time ago. Cynicism vs. optimism. Although he was often forced by circumstances to express a variety of hopes and ideals, it was his private opinion that an optimist was merely uninformed -- if they realized how bad the situation truly was, they'd certainly know there was nothing to be hopeful about. So he had given up thinking of Christine as a woman a long time ago.

But that didn't change the fact that she was one, and once he paused to consider the fact, a rather attractive one, too. She had a certain kind of regalness he always found attractive. Perhaps now ...

... that's ridiculous, he chided himself. *No matter what kind of mood she's in, that doesn't mean she's interested in me.* Considering the two great loves of her life, Corby and Spock, it seems obvious he just wasn't cerebral enough to suit her.

This is ridiculous, he decided, turning on his side and shutting his eyes. Somehow he felt Christine Chapel was out of his league.



McCoy entered the RecRoom on his midafternoon break. He knew that another cup of coffee would make his mouth feel like a mile of bad road but still inserted a tab in the machine to order one. Taking the steaming cup he looked around the room and saw Harris, Waterbury and Wade -- the Three Musketeers, as he affectionately dubbed them (although he was aware of the fact that many of the crew referred to him, Kirk and Spock as just that) -- sitting at a far table, apparently deep in conversation, and decided to join them.

Nikki Harris looked up at him, green eyes sparkling, as he approached, and pointed to a chair. "You just missed the show of a lifetime," she announced.

"Really?" he commented and sipped the coffee. "Tell me about it."

"Well, we missed some of it because it started before we came in." Nikki leaned forward excitedly. "Spock was here with the Captain during their break and Christine came in and --"

Oh, Lord, McCoy thought, *what has she done now?* "Go on," he urged.

"I didn't hear all of the discussion but evidently he was explaining some principle of IDIC to the Captain who then saw Christine and asked her to join them. Well, she did, and Spock continued whatever it was he was saying. Suddenly she stood up and said -- and she was smiling -- 'Mr. Spock, you can take your IDIC and shove it up your --'"

"I get the idea," McCoy said, waving a hand. "But you're kidding, aren't you?"

"God's truth," Nikki said, shaking her head and raising a hand as though to pledge. "You can ask anyone who was here. I thought the Captain was going to rupture something trying not to laugh, especially at the look on Spock's face. Finally Spock raised that eyebrow and looked at her and said 'Miss Chapel, I don't know what's come over you.' Then she gave him one of those looks and walked to the door. She stopped and looked back and told him 'I've just declared my independence.' and marched out the door. You could've heard a tribble drop in here, it was so quiet."

McCoy shook his head, amused, bewildered, and just mildly amazed.

McCoy decided he was going to enjoy a good night's sleep, and a good morning's as well, as he entered his cabin, contemplating his day off tomorrow. After he got up, he would have an enormous breakfast, which he would try doubly hard to forget was soy-synthesized, and then go to the pool for awhile. He hadn't had a swim in months and somehow it seemed especially appealing. He loved to swim, even more to scuba dive, though facilities for that did not exist onboard. Maybe that was what he'd arrange for the next shoreleave. He made a mental note to mention it to Jim in case he could influence the choice of the liberty port somehow. He also decided to mention it to Christine. He knew her to have been a medal-winning swimmer at one time and she would probably enjoy it, too. *Funny, he thought, it was the first time he ever thought of spending a shoreleave with Nurse Chapel. Nurse Chapel ... Christine ...*

For reasons he was unsure of, she seemed to be on his mind more and more. Tests completed, he had managed to find the hormone combination she needed and had started the injections. She claimed she "felt" better, and it was true that her little outbursts had almost ceased, but there was something different about her. Even more surprising to him was the fact that he liked the change that had appeared. It seemed as though she had come out of her shell, in a manner of speaking, and after all these years he was finally getting to know the real person behind the aura of professionalism and duty. And he liked that person a great deal -- enough to make him worry about what might happen.

Because feelings like that had their drawbacks. Caring for someone meant commitments and obligations and he didn't know if he wanted to make them, or have someone making them to him. Indeed it made him quite nervous. He had happily discarded most aspects of his personal life sometime before, along with any urge to get personal with a woman, and all that had been reinforced when Tonia left. Tempting though it might be, he wasn't at all sure he wanted any of it stirred up again.

He had decided to think more about swimming -- how many laps he would take and what dives he would attempt -- when there was a knock at his door. No doubt someone with a blister. "I'm off duty," he barked. "Whatever you've got, the nightshift can handle it."

"It's Christine," the voice came through the door. "Can I talk to you?"

What on earth did she want? It was awfully late. He'd worked some with the nightshift helping them set up some work, taken considerable time over his late dinner -- it was almost lights-out. "All right." He activated the manual lock on the door. "I'm sorry," he said as it opened, "I didn't know it was you."

Christine, arms folded, wearing a long robe, entered the room. "It's freezing in that hall. I think the thermostat is off on this deck again."

He watched her enter and pause in the middle of the room, apparently looking past his office space to the rest of it. He wondered if her new appearance had anything to do with the way he had been feeling about her. She was like a whole new person he had gotten to know. Maybe the other blonde Nurse Chapel, with this new personality, would've struck him differently.

"Ah ... what can I do for you?" he said finally. "Why don't you sit down?"

"Thanks. I just wanted to talk a little. Do you have any coffee?"

He shook his head. "No, but I have some fabulous sherry."

"Sherry? I would've expected whiskey from you, Leonard."

He paused long enough to notice she had called him by his name. She had before, about once a year. "It was a birthday present," he said apologetically. "O.K.?"

"Sure, anything."

He reached for two glasses and filled them. "So ..." he urged.

"I ... I just wanted to apologize," she said slowly, "for what an awful bitch I've been lately. I thought about sending everyone a note but that seemed a little impractical."

He handed her a glass. "No need for that, really. We all have our moods and our off days."

She shook her head after sipping the sherry. "No, that's not it. Well, maybe it is. I don't know how to explain it. I've even surprised myself. The trouble is that after something happens, I feel good about it, as though it really needed to happen and whatever I said really was what I felt at the time." She paused. "When was your birthday?"

"About six months ago."

"Do you know mine's next month? And don't you dare ask me how old I am; I'm trying to forget. That's a part of it, too. I keep thinking it's about time I was saying the things I've been saying."

"Declaring your independence?" he asked before he realized what he said.

"You heard about that, too?" she sighed. "And that's a really big part of it. Do you know how much time and effort I've put in to waiting for that man to notice I'm alive?"

McCoy took a chair opposite her and shrugged noncommittally.

"Oh, it's all right, I know that everyone knows how I've felt about Spock. The really stupid thing is that I used to be proud of it. I felt so noble, waiting silently for him to finally realize that little Christine was his for the taking if he would just ask. But now it all seems so useless, so goddamn useless. I've been waiting my whole life for things to happen -- after all, it isn't lady-like to go out and make them happen. But I've spent my whole life being lady-like and exactly nothing has happened. There's something wrong when the biggest event of a woman's life is going into menopause."

"Why did you change your hair?" he ventured quietly, feeling rather pleased over the fact that she had elected to confide in him.

"Oh, a lot of reasons. Suddenly I was just sick of the face I saw looking back at me in the mirror. And sick of the effort of looking like someone I really wasn't. Or maybe wasn't ever going to have a chance to be, I don't really know. All of a sudden I realized that there wasn't honestly anyone to go through all the effort for, not really. I certainly didn't care anymore. I've wasted so much time all my life. Well, not in studying, because I love my work, I really do, but everything else has been a study in wasted effort. Even Roger. You know we probably

never would've been happy together if we had married. He was a hopeless snob about a lot of things. In fact, in a lot of ways, he was just like Spock. And I know we'd never be happy together either, even if the miraculous did happen and he decided to acknowledge my existence in his universe as more than a part of the furniture on this ship. I deluded myself. I know it, and I can admit now that it was stupid. It was easier than facing a lot of other things. If you set up a goal you can never have, losing doesn't hurt nearly as much. Wouldn't he just love the logic to that?"

McCoy discovered he wasn't really listening to her because he was more preoccupied with looking at her. Cliched, he admitted, but he felt like he was looking at her for the first time. Not quite statuesque, but tall and very trim. Although his more lascivious inclinations leaned toward the lush and buxom types, she had an athletic build he realized he found quite appealing. She talked with her hands, he noted, long slim fingers that moved gracefully with expression. And she had beautiful eyes ... wasn't it Jim who mentioned that once, that Christine had eyes like mirrors that revealed everything she felt no matter what expression she wore? He wondered why it had taken him so long to ... well, say it ... to appraise her as a woman? He realized his inclinations were toward the younger ones, and decided to let that Freudian dog lie. The grass had always been greener somewhere else, until just lately. Christine, are you really the only woman aboard? *Get hold of yourself, Leonard*, he thought, *before you say some of this out loud*. Suddenly he was aware of sapphire eyes peering at him from under a fringe of dark hair.

"Are you listening to me?" she quizzed.

"Sure, everyone knows what a great listener I am. They're installing a confessional next week."

"I can't stand in line," she said. "I have nothing very exciting to tell. And if you think that isn't hard to admit at my age ..."

"There's always the future."

"And I'm going to grab it," she said determinedly, "with both hands. I've been thinking -- and that's really what I wanted to talk to you about. I think I'm going to ask for a transfer."

The idea hit him like cold water. He wanted to jump up and shout 'No' but he couldn't think of how he would say it. "Now why would you want to do that?"

"I think I need it. Maybe go back into research. Not that I dislike the adventure of being in space. There's never a dull moment on this ship. But I feel like I'm stagnating all over and I have to do something about it. You can write to me and tell me if Spock dies of a broken heart."

"I'm not a very good letterwriter," he said offhandedly.

"Neither am I, really. I used to write poetry, though. Terrible stuff, mawkishly sentimental, dripping with emotion. I wrote tons of it before when I was waiting for Roger. I just found some of it the other day. I ripped it into little pieces and flushed it down the head. It seemed very symbolic, I was flushing everything away somehow. All the old useless me."

"Now that's not true, you're not useless."

"I am to myself and that's what counts most of all. That's what's so discouraging. Oh yes, I'm a good nurse but when I look in the mirror and ask 'what have you done for yourself, Christine?' all I get is a big zero. I've got to do something about that while there's still time. That's why I think a transfer would be a good idea."

"Are you sure that's it? Not just running away from bad memories?" *You can't go*, he thought, *what will I do without you? Without you ...* She had become a constant in his life, silently and unnoticed, she had.

"Maybe a little of that, too, but what's the difference? Oh, I guess I could always send out announcements. On little white cards with engraving they could say 'this is to announce that Christine Celeste Chapel, being of sound mind and body, hereby announces she's come to her senses.'"

"You're being awfully hard on yourself."

"Who has a better right? Besides, if I don't do it, no one else will." She smiled. "I've had a couple of good offers for new positions. I hope you'll write me a glowing recommendation."

"I'll miss you," he said, then quickly, "We all will."

"Oh, sure, for a week or two. You know how things are here. We're all close because we live together. It's easier that way. But when the situation changes ... well, that's life. I'll miss this, too, but there will be other things." She nodded solemnly. "That's it, too, you know ... it's sad when I think about it. Everyone will be politely remorseful when I leave but there isn't one person here who'd say 'don't go, I want you to stay.' Can't you understand that? I've got to go out and find something, someone, for myself -- someone I'll matter to -- before it's too late."

McCoy felt utterly tongue-tied. Damn her impetuousness. This was all too sudden. She was flushed away all his admittedly ambiguous plans as well.

"I'm sorry," she said as she set down the glass. "I didn't mean to unburden myself on you like this. That confessional really isn't needed, you're doing just fine without it." She came to her feet and started for the door.

What to say, he thought, *what ...* He was proving she was right. He worked more closely with her than anyone else and no doubt knew her better than anyone else -- at least on the ship. Especially after what she just said, letting her go would only confirm what she felt. She was wrong, he did want her to stay, for his sake, for the sake of the possibilities -- but that wasn't much to offer a lady. She turned to face him and he thought he saw tears behind her dark lashes. Did she want him to say something? Had everything she said been largely for his benefit? The idea pleased him so immensely he wanted to dismiss it immediately as illusory.

"Thanks for the drink," she said. "And the time." She forced a smile and turned to the door again.



"Christine ... wait a minute."

She turned, a curious expression on her face.

His hands dropped to his side. "I'm the one person, Christine. Don't go. I want you to stay."

"You don't mean it," she said in a monotone. "You're just trying to be nice. That damned streak of compassion in you is a mile wide."

"No ... it's not that. For God's sake, Chris, what can I say right now? There isn't anything I can promise you, not really, because I just don't know. I can't predict the future even about myself. But I can tell you about the present and the fact that lately I've had a hard time getting you out of my mind. I'm set in my ways and I'm a bad-tempered old country doctor who occasionally drinks too much and sings sad songs. But I know the truth in everything you've said about your life because I've experienced my own version of it." He stepped closer to her and reached out, touching her throat, where he saw the pulse, very lightly. "I never noticed you had a birthmark there," he said quietly.

"I've always wanted to have a yellow butterfly tattooed around it," she said suddenly, "but it seemed outrageously out of character for me."

"I think that would be very pretty," he murmured. Then: "I'm asking you to stay, Chris. For my sake."

"Don't you think we'll drive each other crazy? My temper is as bad as yours anymore."

"Maybe. But it's better than going crazy alone."

"I don't want Spock anymore," she said emphatically. "I want you to know that. I'm tired of wasting my life on something so hopeless. Do you believe me?"

"Everyone tells the truth in confession," he smiled. "Those are the rules."

"I'm different now," she added. "I won't be the same Christine you've known. You've got to know that, too."

"You'll forgive me for reminding you but if you'll remember I never propositioned the other Christine." This time his eyes twinkled.

The tears came again, and she started to laugh. Then she hugged him. He put his arms around her, marveling at how something so new and so formerly alien seemed like exactly the right thing to do.



*I know how to take care of a
little bunny!*



Any Time But This, Any Place But Now

Cheryl Rice



h, it's about time for a break. I've been working on those tests for hours. Let's see ... ten whole minutes off.

Time for a cup of coffee and a chance to stretch my legs.

Can't believe it ... worked all the way through. Missed dinner and everything. Not that it will hurt me any. I need to lose some weight. This stupid job; I never have any chance to get any exercise.

Guess I'll look and see what's going on outside ... there, nothing much. As usual.

It isn't fair, here I am stuck with this dull job, nothing interesting ever happens. Just day after day the same old routine ... and the same old coffee, Bitter and bland at the same time.

Boring. Let's face it. I was born at the wrong time in history. Stuck here right between the beautiful past and the exciting future. Well, it has to be more exciting than what I've got now. Adventures, places to go. Not forms to fill out, red tape to snarl you up.

And the past, the "olden days". It must have been wonderful. Men were men. They were heroes. They didn't have all these machines to hide behind. They went out and destroyed evil ... slayed dragons and all that. Well maybe, not really.

I guess I do read too much. But those stories must have some truth in them. Like Arthur and Camelot. No man around here would ever dream of giving up everything for love. That story is so beautiful ... the Grail and Merlin. "They sleep with forever undead."

Wonder if there will ever be anyone like him again? And the other stories, even the ones for children. Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella. No Prince Charmings around today. Just guys looking for a good time.

No one ever understands why I spend my time on that stuff. Reading about Hobbits and strange places. Never-Never Land. Peter Pan never sneaked in through my window and it seems I've spent half my life waiting for him.

I suppose it is a waste; dreaming of strange animals, "wondrous creatures, passing fair". But my life is so dull. Sometimes it breaks my heart that I'm stuck here away from where I really belong. "It's not down on any map. True places never are". That's so true, wish I'd said it.

This isn't helping things any. I'd better finish this coffee and get back to the lab. My but the stars are pretty tonight ... but they are so far away.

Well so long universe. I'm back to the salt mines. Honestly that Dr. McCoy is a slave driver. Some people are never satisfied.

THIS TIME AROUND WITHOUT YOU

Ingrid Cross

*My world is cold without you:
life offers empty fulfillment,
I've misplaced the magic I created for quiet moments,
the stars sulk since we kissed last.*

*My life's work is a tedious chore,
a gnawing discontent,
Coastlines are farther apart,
"ego involvement" a rocky road.*

*Life is colder,
medicine lonelier,
friends younger
without you.*

*Remembering your body's craters and hills
stirs in me a dead passion.*

*I need you, I want you,
I find you in every reflection.
Always in the mirror is a
solitary figure not as brave
as when he left you behind.*

*I will rediscover you someday.
This time, I will steal your body
(with its painfully tender
crevices and knolls)
and tuck it away in seclusion.*

*Together we will pull the coastlines
back within our reach.*



To the Edge

Mona Delitsky

McCoy winced and walked once more around the dimly lit cave. "Spock, I insist you do it. There is nothing more to be done for the Captain. I can keep him warm and comfortable enough. Heaven knows, it's not hard to keep him warm in this climate," he said as he wiped more sweat from his forehead.

Spock lay on his back on the floor of the cave, heavily bandaged around his abdomen, his head propped up by his tricorder. "Doctor, the *Enterprise* won't be back for about 12 hours. The Captain is in more danger of dying than I. He was closer to the explosion than we were and I feel it necessary to be alert enough to tend to his needs until the ship returns."

McCoy was getting impatient. "Spock, you're injured internally, some of your organs are bleeding, and I have done all I can for you already. It's unfortunate that my medikit has medicines designed mainly for the human physique and any liquids I give you may not perform their function properly or may make you nauseous."

"They usually do." Spock mumbled.

"Well, your body chemistry, including that green stuff in your veins, is your problem. And I suggest you use it to heal yourself." McCoy knelt down next to Spock and spoke with a quiet patience. "Look, the Captain may be unconscious until the ship arrives. I can tend to him myself. I want you to go into your Vulcan healing trance until you are cured. I can't help you any more and you'll be better able to help the Captain if you are well. Don't you see that?"





Spock looked up at the ceiling of the cave for a full minute. Then he spoke. "That is a logical stance. It is just that we must use all our resources to keep the Captain alive." Spock said with difficulty. McCoy could see in Spock the worry which was not so well hidden as it might be.

"Yes, I know. He'll be all right. I've given him something to keep the fever down and his wounds are patched up. I am a doctor, Spock -- He'll get the best care I can give. Please, if you take care of healing yourself, I can devote all of my attention to the Captain."

Spock thought for a second. "That is true. All right, Doctor McCoy. I will attempt to heal my wounds. But remember, when I am about to come out of it, you must be ready to do as I say. Slap me across the cave if necessary. It will bring me to full consciousness. Do you understand?" Spock looked at the doctor.

"I understand," he replied solemnly.

Spock turned his gaze again to the ceiling and slowly closed his eyes. McCoy breathed a sigh of relief. Thank goodness the Vulcan had listened to reason. He smiled while looking at Spock. An amazing creature. McCoy felt admiration for him at that moment, for his devotion to Kirk. Kirk.

McCoy stopped smiling and walked over to the Captain who was lying unconscious near the wall of the cave. McCoy took another tricorder reading. Blood, pulse, abnormal. He was sweating profusely, his body trying to compensate for the almost unbearably hot and humid temperature in the cave. Kirk looked very haggard and worn, his face pale and wet. McCoy gave the Captain another shot, and wiped his face with a torn piece of his uniform.

McCoy was worried. He knew that there was some chance that the Captain could die in the twelve hours left. Kirk was still sweating, his teeth had started to chatter and he had lost a lot of blood. McCoy took off the shirt of his own uniform revealing the bandage on his arm and his other cuts and bruises, and slowly put it over the Captain's torn yellow, putting Kirk's head through the neck of it and drawing his arms through the sleeves. He had to cut open the sides of the uniform so Kirk would fit into it.

He looks strange in blue, McCoy thought. *Unfamiliar, almost.* Barechested now, the doctor adjusted the bandage on his own arm. He was tired, very tired, but he could not sleep. His two patients needed him. Spock might awaken any moment and he had to give the Captain shots periodically. *No, can't sleep. Must stay awake ...*

He sat and thought about the day's events. The solar flare that had cut them off from the ship, ionizing the atmosphere, screwing up the transporter. *"Get the ship out of here, Mr. Scott. The landing party will be protected by the atmospheric layers. Don't come back until the storm's abated. Estimate?" "About 12 hours at this rate, Captain."* The landing party had only been stranded a short time when Spock read on his tricorder a land mine, small and crude but dangerous. The Captain had wandered off by himself in that direction. As soon as Spock realized it, he called "Captain!" and ran towards him. But it was too late. As McCoy looked up at Spock's yell, BLAAM!! the blast knocked them yards, Kirk the farthest since he was closest to it, Spock next, doing a double dive, and McCoy, the farthest from it, covering his ears and hitting the dirt. *What the hell was that mine doing there anyway?* he mused. *This planet is inhabited, yes, but we'd landed in a unpopulated area according to our orders and the non-interference directive. Besides, these people shouldn't have technology advanced enough for things like that. Then again, we can't be sure as this planet is not a member of the Federation ... Damn transporter sets us down in the middle of a mine field. Great.*

Spock and McCoy had carried an unconscious Kirk into a nearby cave. It was hot and damp in there. McCoy was bleeding but he hastily checked the Captain and realized the only thing that would save him from going into shock was a transfusion. "Thank goodness I'm blood type O, Spock. Universal donor." It was, in actuality, a dangerous thing for him to do, for he had lost blood as well, but the Captain was worse off, and so without hesitating, McCoy donated enough to put a slight amount of color back into Kirk's face. Then he bandaged up Kirk and the Vulcan, who *insisted* on helping even though he could not sit up.

"I'm the doctor here, dammit!" "Then, Doctor, tend to the Captain, will you?" "Spock, I know you'll never admit it but you need my help!" he had said as he wrapped Spock's abdomen in bandages. Spock gave out what seemed to McCoy to be an audible snort and lay back quietly to be treated. *"Well, I'm glad we're in agreement here."* McCoy had said. Spock shot him a look of "Oh, yeah?" and McCoy chuckled for a second until he was through, then returned to the Captain. He ran his medical scanner over him for a moment and gave him two shots, then tore off some of the yellow material from his uniform and wiped Kirk's face which was sweaty and dusty. It was then he tried to convince the stubborn Vulcan to heal himself ...

He shook his head at Spock. The Vulcan lay there, eyes closed, teeth clenched and McCoy could almost sense all the forces acting to heal, aid, fix, amend, bypass, adjust, make well the cells in his body. An incredible, quiet, internal violence that would put the Vulcan back together. This was something outside of McCoy's science and he was grateful for it.

The light was thinning out from the door of their grotto. McCoy stopped daydreaming and it was then that his weakness hit him again. He was sitting and sweating not only from the intense heat, but also from the loss of blood which caused him to feel even hotter at every movement. He was dizzy and his head and neck ached. The cave was getting darker by the minute. Picking up a phaser, he fired at a boulder until it glowed and radiated heat. He was weak but he had taken care of his two patients and for a moment, felt content. Things were under control ...

Hours passed, hours and hours. McCoy sat still, watched his two patients as dusk came to this region. He played games in his mind; tried to remember all of the names of the bones of the human skeleton, latin names, one after the other, tried to think of all the streets in his Georgia hometown, the names of his classmates at the Academy, *anything*, as long as it kept his mind active and working. It was a trial and he was getting more tired ...

Six hours had passed since they had entered. McCoy was sitting with his back to the wall of the cave to hold him up. He slowly put his head to the wall and closed his eyes for a few minutes. His bones ached. The red sun in this system had gone down and the cave was nearly pitch black. The only light came from the boulder nearby that he had heated earlier; it cast an eerie glow about the cave. He felt progressively weaker -- his head pounded and his vision was blurry.

McCoy opened his eyes, and looked at the walls of the cave. The fatigue was playing on his mind. He felt very, very alone.

He looked at the two still bodies near him and his eyes began to mist slowly. "Here I am, 46 years old, on a planet 100 light years from Earth, sitting in a wretched cave, half naked, watching my two friends ... the two people closest to me in the whole universe ... dying before my eyes. And what am I doing to help them?"

Professionally, he knew he had aided them as well as he could. Emotionally, however, as he watched them in the gloomy, depressing, barely lit surroundings, he began to feel a pervading sense of uselessness. Good-for-nothing. Ten years of medical training and it might add up to nothing. The two he cared for the most ...

McCoy put his hand to his head and closed his eyes. They stung from the wetness. *Now ... now, wait a minute. You are a doctor. You're the key to their survival. There's less than six hours left.* He stopped and listened for a minute. It was very quiet and he could hear their breathing, both of them, Spock's faster than Kirk's. *You have got to hold on. You know you can.* He tried to convince himself. *They need you ... You are necessary ... must stay awake and aware. You may be the only one conscious to signal the ship when the time comes. That's right. Then you can get them back to Sickbay as soon as possible.*

McCoy was nodding his head in agreement with himself. He looked up at the walls of the cave, where the light from the boulder made strange shapes on them. *... must stay awake. If I walk around a bit, blood will circulate and I may be able to keep my eyes open.*

He got up slowly, his bones creaking and his muscles stiff and sore. His face contorted in pain as he rose. As he stood, he suddenly felt dizzy and started to sway. He fell against the wall, then grabbed it and righted himself.

Closer to the boulder, he could see that the bandage on his arm was saturated with blood. Changing it, he calmly treated it with antiseptic and wrapped it in a fresh bandage. Then he got up again and started to walk around in a circle, round and round to maintain his consciousness. Round and round, circling his friends. A doctor on night duty.

I feel more like a witchdoctor, circling the sick, doing some sort of strange ritual, summoning the gods to heal them. The image seemed humorous to him for a minute, then grotesque in its "reality". *A god's help would be welcome at this point.*

As a thought, he picked up a communicator. "McCoy to Enterprise ... McCoy to Enterprise." Solitary static answered him. He put it down.

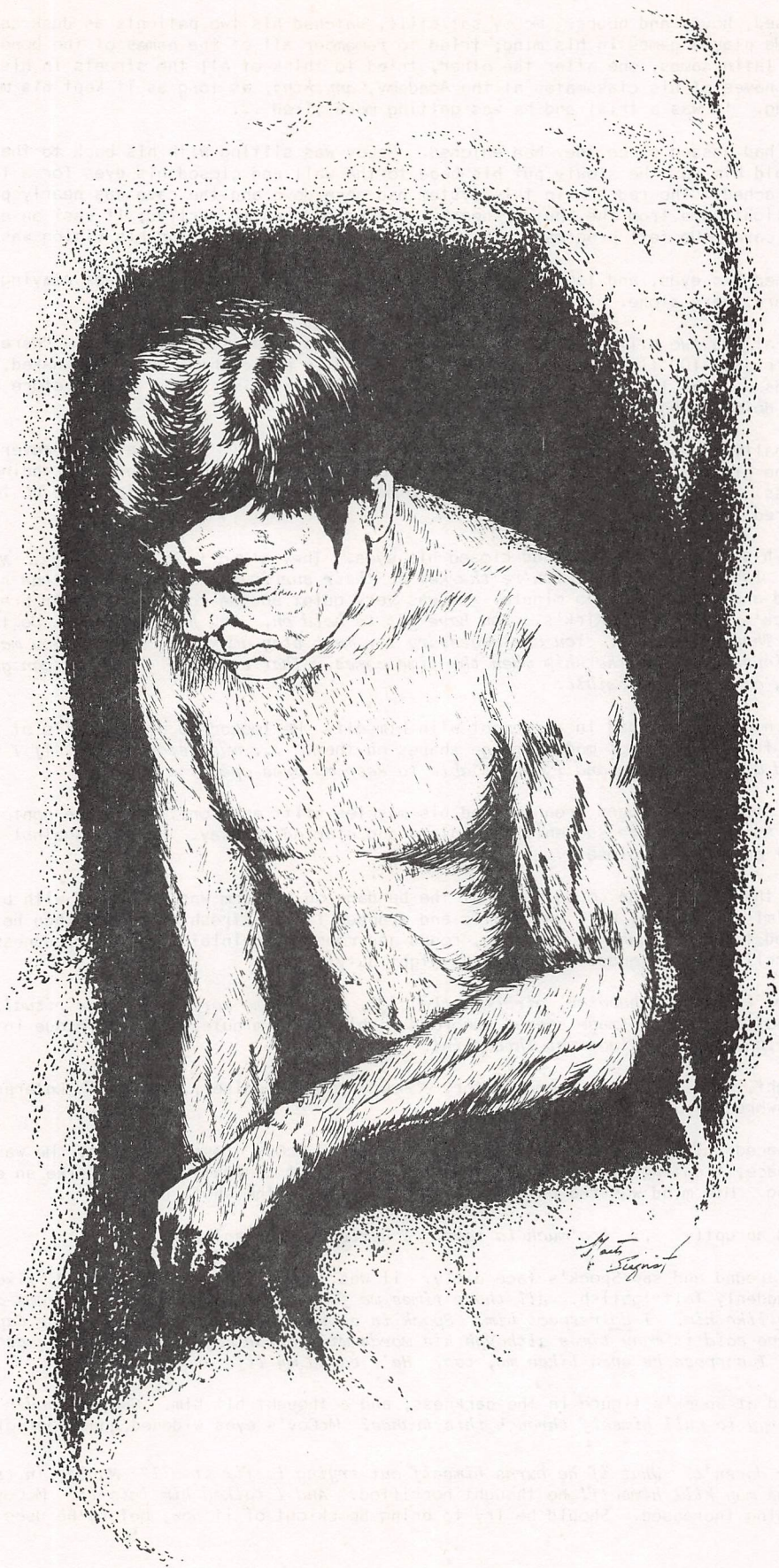
Again he paced. The circles became endless, endless. McCoy closed his eyes. He was drifting through space, floating as he circled timelessly, without context. He felt like an entity unrelated to anything. His mind was the only thing that existed in the whole universe ...

He stopped abruptly. *... too much to take. Nonexistence. Isolation.*

He looked around and saw Spock's face dimly. It was set as stone -- determined, fixed. Looking at him, he suddenly felt foolish. *All those times we fought, argued, bickered. Seems all so stupid now. I do like him. I do respect him. Spock is a brave being who does love the Captain. His actions have said it many times although his words will never say it. Their friendship is tried and true. I suppose he even likes me, too. He's saved my life enough times.*

He squinted at Spock's figure in the darkness, and a thought hit him. *God, I wonder if he has enough energy to pull himself through this trance?* McCoy's eyes widened questioningly.

What if he doesn't? What if he burns himself out trying to fix it all? Maybe, in trying to heal himself, he may kill himself! he thought horrified. *And I talked him into it!* McCoy tensed up and his breathing increased. Should he try to bring Spock out of it now, before he uses himself up?



But wait a minute. He shook his head as best he could to clear it. Spock isn't stupid. He wouldn't go under if he thought it wouldn't work, would he? I mean, these Vulcans know their own bodies, don't they? Don't they?

McCoy tried to rationalize that this was the case, but he felt uneasy about it. *If it isn't, I'll never forgive myself.* He walked over to Spock and ran his medical scanner over him. Body functions very low, almost nonexistent. *No doubt all the energy is channeled to the injured areas,* he hoped.

The worry was getting to him and his teeth clenched in frustration. *I realize now, now that's he's in danger of dying, that he means a great deal to me, a very great deal, more than I ever thought.* McCoy shook his head sadly.

He turned to Kirk and the sight of him so wretched sickened him. *Jim. Oh, Jim. I'd drain all my blood for you if I could to save you.* He bent down and held the Captain's hand. *I would rather die than have you die,* he thought. Emotion welled inside him again and his eyes became wet and cloudy. He put his hand over his eyes. *What am I doing here on this hostile world? I can't exist and let this happen. I don't exist ...* McCoy was shaking and he fell on his back and cried, deeply, for minutes and minutes and minutes on end, as images of the past melted through his brain and this seemed like the end, the end of it all, three lives ended in the blackness of Beta Niobe 6, three beings destroyed as though they never existed ...

"Dr. McCoy."

McCoy thought he was dreaming, or hallucinating, or was in heaven. He lay there in the dark with his eyes open for a minute. Had he heard a voice or was he going mad?

"Dr. McCoy." It was Spock, the Vulcan's voice raspy and edged with desperation. The doctor remembered. He jumped to his feet and put his hands on Spock's shoulders.

"Yes, Spock, yes? What should I do?"

"Hit me, doctor, hard, hit me ..." McCoy slapped his face twice, three times, over and over and over. Spock kept his eyes closed until finally McCoy's tenth belt sent Spock reeling over onto his belly. McCoy, out of breath, looked at him. Spock picked his head up from the ground, looked at McCoy with a slight, sheepish grin and said, "Thank you, Doctor."

McCoy was heaving but he smiled. "Spock ... ah, so glad I could help ... Thank you, Spock," he panted.

Spock looked into the doctor's eyes. He looked very worn and Spock sensed the trial the Isolation had been. He didn't say anything.

Spock rose to his feet. "How is the Captain, Doctor?"

"Ah, well, as good as can be expected. I've been giving him drugs periodically but I'm running out of them. His blood and pulse are still abnormal and he still has a fever."

Spock bent down and looked hard at Kirk's face. He wiped some sweat from Kirk's forehead and moved him slightly to make him more comfortable, all the time watching Kirk's face intently. McCoy just watched Spock out of the corner of his eye.

Spock peered outside the cave. Day was returning to the planet. It was an impressive sunrise, the huge fiery red giant filling up a large part of the horizon. The cave had been hot all night but now it was getting hotter again.

"Doctor, have you tried to signal the ship?"

"Yes. Without result."

"When?"

"A few hours ago. Just got noise."

Spock walked outside the cave. "Spock to Enterprise ... Spock to Enterprise." Spock heard crackles and buzzes but no voices.

McCoy gave Kirk the last of the drugs he had. Spock came back into the cavern as the hypo hissed in the Captain's arm. Spock bent down to look at him.

McCoy, not realizing that Spock had just tried, took up his own communicator and stepped outside the cave. "McCoy to Enterprise ... McCoy to Enterprise." But standing up out there was too much. The brightness of the sun hit his eyes and the fatigue from the last ten hours just took over. McCoy stumbled and fell, and the communicator went flying.

"Enterprise to landing party. Is that you, Dr. McCoy?" its tiny speaker said.

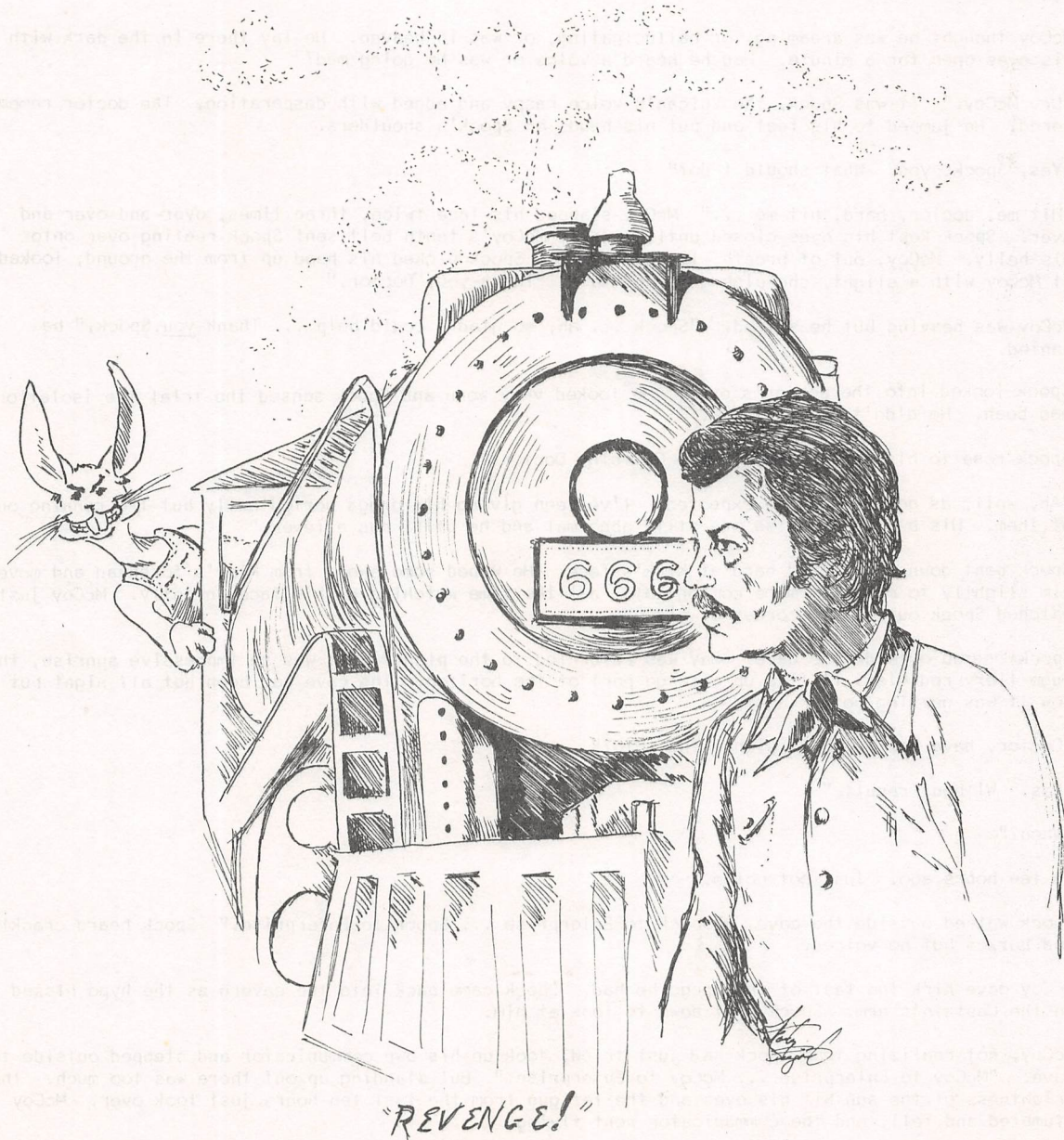
Spock heard it and ran outside. The doctor lay flat on his back, too tired to get up. Spock looked at the doctor, folded his arms, and cocked an eyebrow. Dazedly and grinning, McCoy whispered, "I think they're back."

As they prepared to beam up, Spock held the Captain in his arms while McCoy held the equipment.

"Spock ... thank you for saving our lives."

"I beg to differ with you, Doctor. You saved our lives."

McCoy looked down and said, after a moment, "One is only truly alive when there is purpose," as they glittered away.

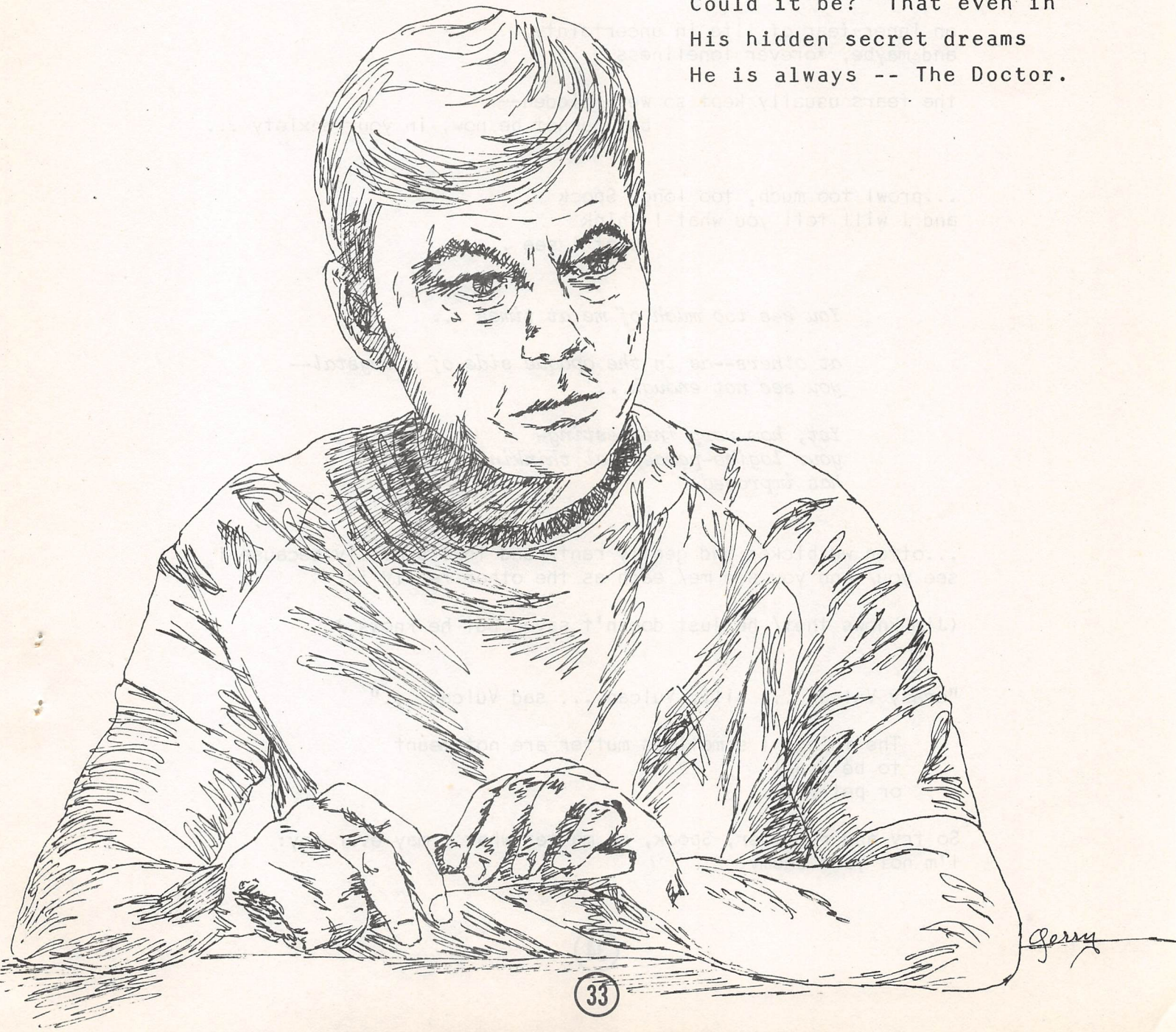


THE NAKED TIME

Sulu fighting with a sword;
The Captain says he loves his ship;
Spock is crying; Chapel's hurt;
And Riley sings -- he's Ireland's King.

Surely someone touched McCoy --
Gave him the all-revealing germ;
But he is showing no effect.

Could it be? That even in
His hidden secret dreams
He is always -- The Doctor.



PRISONERS IN A COLD CELL :

a matched set

(thoughts on "Bread and Circuses")

J. Feaster

I remember when we were together in that cell/and you started
rattling the bars/ like a sick-angry bird-beast in a cage .../ I
watched you/ with a certain clinical detachment./...strange.../
for once, you were the Human, it seemed/ and l the emotionless alien ...

I begin to guess your fears as I watch you pace:

an inner-fear of life in uncertainty
and maybe, forever loneliness ...

the fears usually kept so well hidden--
but cannot be now, in your anxiety ...

...prowl too much, too long, Spock
and I will tell you what I think
what I see ...

You see too much of me at times ...

*at others--as in the opaque side of a crystal--
you see not enough...*

*Yet, how very interesting-
your logico-perceptual thinking
has improved.*

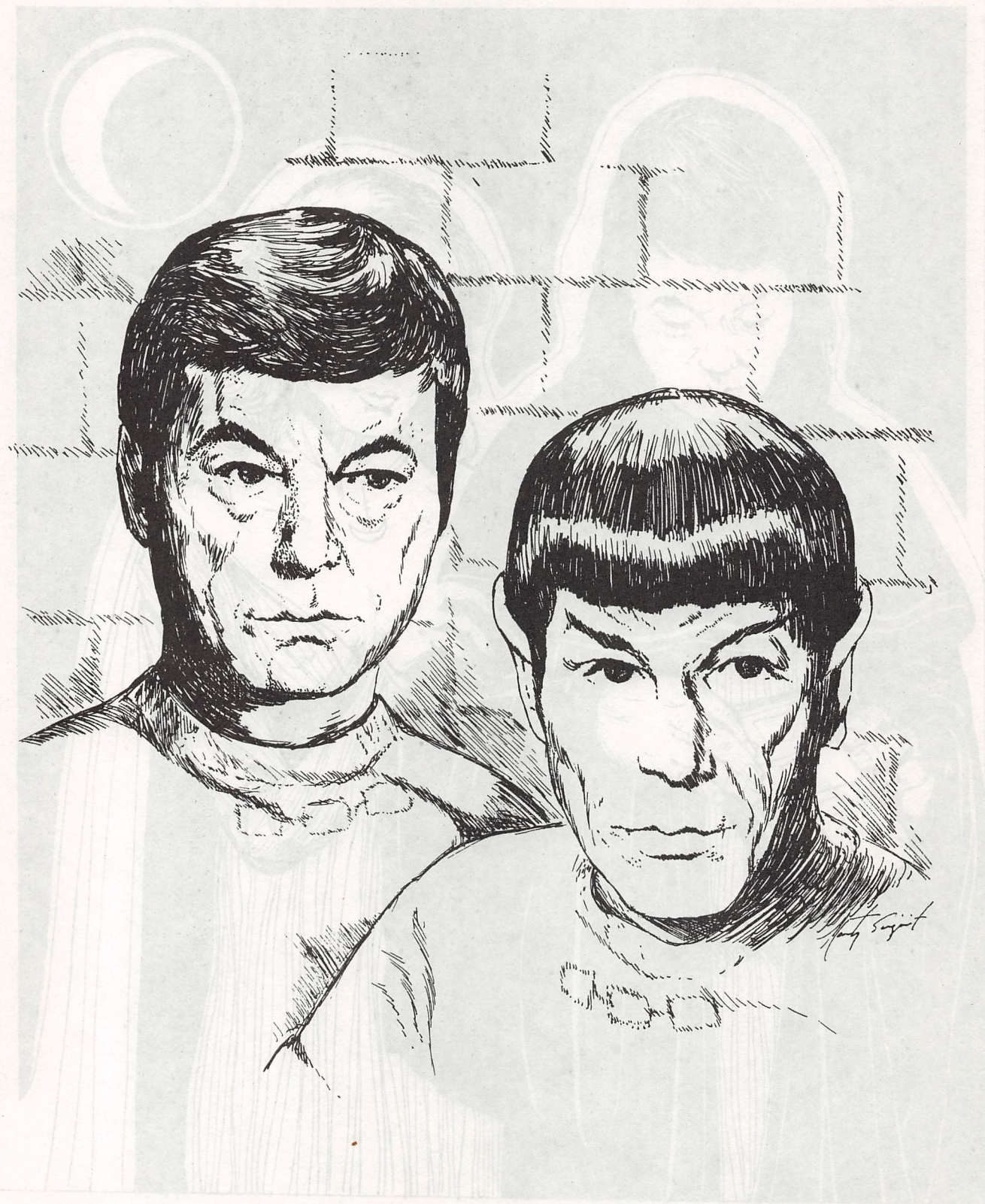
...often we bicker and gently rant/ and that's mostly because I
see you/ and you see me/ each as the other really is.

(Jim knows that/ he just doesn't say-/ but he knows.)

"crazy Vulcan ... silly Vulcan ... sad Vulcan ..."

The things I sometimes mutter are not meant
to be cruel
or petty ...

So try and remember, Spock, no matter what I may ever say:
I'm not your enemy.





No Child of Man

Anne Laurie Logan



he smell of bruised grass and summer dust ...

Dr. McCoy shook his head. This was the *Enterprise*; the only grass in a thousand parsecs was down in the biolabs, and it grew in a hydroponic solution: no dust. The hopeless high-summer smell had simply been linked in his memory to ... how long ago? Twenty ... four years.

Her mother ... she'd sworn to him ...

He looked down again at the coded slip. It hadn't changed. He knew what it said without using the reader; it was a simple enough message ...

Joanna M. McCoy. Pregnancy Test: Positive. Week nine.

Good thing he hadn't run the test himself. He wouldn't have handled it properly.

Full moon and high summer, Lammastide. Before the Altar, in front of the Mound, the barrow wherein the Most Sacred Hearth of the Great Goddess burns, the women are dancing. Since moonrise they have danced, before the fire of herbs in the Great Circle. It is forbidden for any male to watch the dancing. He had not known where his wife was going, when she slipped from the house and he followed her secretly ...

The doors slid back. His daughter stood, watching him warily, noting the code-slip on the desk before him.

"I wanted to talk to you," she said quietly.

He did not want to look at her; his eyes slid away from her abdomen (*too soon for that, anyway*, he thought) as he waved in the general direction of an unoccupied chair.

"Not just about the ... my pregnancy," she added. She slid sideways towards the chair, almost hugging the wall.

Maybe she did feel guilty about it. The numb shock had not worn off far enough for him to have considered what attitude he should adopt with her.

My god, she's my daughter -- my daughter, too ...

McCoy cleared his throat. "I suppose they must have reached simple hygiene even in the few months before you dropped out of nursing school," he said. "So I'm assuming you must have intended ... at least, you haven't chosen to terminate it."

Joanna was playing with some sort of charm or trinket. She held it up as she caught his eye. A necklace, a silver crescent, horns up, on a knotted red cord.

"Do you remember this? After Mother died, when I cleaned out her old -- both of your -- belongings, I found this stored away. Among other things."

The dances are personal, highly intricate, the quick little feet mincing and pointing, the heads thrown back, the whole body a tool and an instrument for the glory and the pride. He hides in the tree-shadowed darkness outside the Circle and watches the women dance. They wear only their hair, long and cloud-floating or short and sleekly waved; the colored pictograms painted on their sweat-sheened bodies; and bright silver crescents around their necks, suspended from knotted cords.

"Before her ... gradual ... deterioration, your mother was a Covenist -- a witch. So was I, in fact; I thought for a while it was helping her."

"You never bothered to tell me about that. You never told me much of anything, actually. I wish you had come back for the funeral, though. Couldn't you have gotten leave?"

McCoy sighed. "Let's stick to one set of accusations at a time. Arianna and I had been divorced for a good twenty years when she died last spring; her relatives -- you must have met them, a charming bunch -- would never have stood for my presence at their -- celebration."

He cannot move. It is whispered that men have died when they were caught spying on the Rituals. Couples, tetrads, monor circles form and blend and break among the dancers as the music changes; one or another snatches a brand from the smoky fire, the dagger from her belt, and improvises a pattern with it. On the broad altar stands the High Priestess and her attendants, robed loosely in cream and sky-blue. Arianna is with them. Her heavy belly bulges the fabric tight. She had promised him ...

Joanna shook her head. "They're all a part of the same pattern, I guess: why did you always run away from things? Why did you stick me into boarding schools practically as soon as I could talk, and stick your wife into a mental home as soon as she became -- a ... problem? Why did you join Star Fleet as soon as I came of age? If you didn't want me -- you didn't, I know, you wanted a son -- why didn't you let my mother, or your in-laws, have me?"

There were tears in her voice, but her eyes were dry. He reached out to her, and let his arm fall as she pulled away defensively.

"Joanna, I did want -- I loved you, darling; you're my only child, but a doctor, alone, out at all hours ..."

"Everytime I came home for vacation, all you could talk about was some little boy you'd run into in your practice. Somebody's else's son, so strong, so bright, so aggressive. I would have given either arm for you to talk about me like that, did you know that? Sometimes I thought that I could get into the line at your office, come to see you as a patient, and you wouldn't even recognize me." She folded her arms across her stomach and stared at him sullenly.

This is like a nightmare, he thought. I had a nightmare like this once before. This is my daughter, though. Arianna's daughter.

The moon is nearly at its highest when the priestess gives a small hand signal, very brief, a bare alert to the band and the dancers: the drums stop and the woodwinds rise to a shriller, wilder reel, as the feral expectancy that unites the women hangs like a canopy with the smoke around the circle, palpable in the dust-scented air. Four little pony mares are ridden from outside the pall by four bareback copper-colored women, four little ponies trotting daintily with only red cord hackamores to guide them: one black, one grey, one roan, one dun. Their eyes roll fearfully, but they move hypnotised, expertly, through the symbols: compass points, weave back and in the circle sunwise, return to compass corners, each forward individually to center a swift exercise by two of the dancing women, back and weave the circle again, ending each at the point opposite its start and urged into rearing back on her neat little hind legs, holding upright for a long moment as the Priestess leads his wife forward.

"Joanna -- your mother --" he sighed, and tried again. "We'd been seeing each other for a long time, I even joined the Covenists because it was important to her. She was always -- nervous, a very nervy, high-strung woman, but she was beautiful, and graceful, and I loved her so much, I did love her ..."

"And knocked her up, too. I found your marriage certificate, and she must have been about two months along when you legalized it."

He winced. She added, "Not, I suppose, that you consider that much of an excuse for my condition."

"It's not that ... I don't know if I can explain ... after our marriage, Arianna wasn't ... doing very well, she started having fits of depression, alternated with wild rages -- you know about that, I remember telling you about that."

"You made it sound like her fault. You wouldn't let me visit her, or even talk about her. All I knew -- most of it from listening to all those awful neighbor ladies discuss "the poor, dear doctor" when they thought I wasn't paying attention -- was that my mother had started to behave strangely when I was just a baby, and when neither psychosurgery nor the "very latest, most modern" drugs made any difference you had her committed -- permanently, it turned out -- and then divorced her, assuming custody of your offspring." She made a strange little abbreviated half-bow as she sat. "Yours truly. 'A good little thing, but such a *stick!* And her father so friendly and popular!' All in those dulcet Southern tones -- they still make me sick. Maybe you shouldn't have sent me to a school so far north."

"I can't -- I didn't want -- Joanna, however ill your mother was, I did care about her. She said the pregnancy was an accident, and I believed her. She said she couldn't bear to terminate it, so I married her -- even though I'd just finished my residency and wasn't sure I could support *myself*, much less a family. I'd been attending coven meetings with her -- I thought it was a total crock, a pack of semi-lunatics working each other into emotional fugues -- she said I was always "too scientific" to understand -- but when they started to make a great fuss about her pregnancy, trying to work her into the same kind of fool frenzies they favored, I knew it couldn't be good for her."

"And of course you knew best." There was an edge to her smile that he mistrusted. He tried to take her hand again.

"She wasn't a well woman, Joanna! And these so-called friends, they kept harping at her about the baby, how she could get some kind of power, or something, some ritual she could attend -- it was insane! Finally I had to ask -- Arianna promised that she'd stay away until after the baby -- you -- were born. But she -- she ... Joanna, this isn't important. It's *your* condition I wanted to talk about. What are you going to do with a baby and an engineering degree? All alone? Or, has *he* agreed --"

"Anything I want, Daddy. I didn't know if I could explain this ... now I'm not sure I even want to bother ... Daddy, I *am* married. To another woman. The baby is a clone, a nucleus from one of her cells injected into an ovum of mine. She and I are going to one of the Matricate planets, where our marriage will be legal. I took a longer route to hitch up with the *Enterprise* -- I thought you might want to know. Or then again, maybe not."

She sighed. "I found the letters my mother wrote you from the hospital. She sounded sane enough, in them. She spent twenty years thinking that you'd rejected her because you couldn't stand for her to have any ideas that you hadn't given her. Maybe she was right. I never knew you well enough to tell."

"You sound like one of those Lady Libbers." It was a nightmare. Why couldn't he stop thinking about that other nightmare?

Arianna is standing naked in the firelight. One deep-voiced drum beats monotonously as the mares are backed away two and two into the dark beyond the circle, their riders laughing low, caressing the long tangled manes as they bend over their mounts' necks to whisper praises in the pricked ears. And as the drums swell up with the flutes lashing behind them, the dark women bring in the red bull. His hide shivers and he shakes his head as the swift women goad him forward; as the drums move like water over rocks they spin before, about, around him in schools like small fish, like birds about a snorting hill, gymnastics to shame all their previous efforts, vaulting over his humped shoulders like the Etruscan youths in cracked Minoan mosaics.

"Oh really? I thought even boors like the hot-handed captain of yours had given up on that epithet. Oh, don't look so horrified, you were practically throwing me at his head! Him and that nasty little intern -- it's *your* body that budding medico is after, not mine, I'll bet. Was that before or after you found out about my -- condition? Not that it matters, after all, what's a woman -- a girl -- without a *man* to protect her?"



There are no words. She has betrayed him, as her mother betrayed him. He felt very old, and very threatened. She stood and turned to leave. Now she was weeping ... so was he, in fact. She left without looking back.

Another signal from the priestess, the music stops, and the last of the vaulters astride the bull's neck crooked one strong heel in a blow over his heart, pulling back on the heavy horns, so that he falls gracelessly at the feet of the High Priestess. Arianna has a dagger, and she slits the thick neck easily, all in one movement, and the blood spurts across her belly as she stoops; the mares scream, and the women bay like high-voiced foxes as they come forward to catch the blood in bronze bowls, drinking it eagerly, slopping it down their chins and breasts, his wife among them, his wife, his wife ...

I should have told Joanna, he thought. I should have told her about the bull long ago, so she would know how terrible such women are. Joanna is my daughter. There is no such thing as magic, and Joanna is my child also.

They had cast him out of the Coven, even though they never found out how he had watched them feasting. There had been a piece of parchment, badly made, with a long curse spelled out in red ink or worse. "... to wander between air, sea, and earth, and have no dwelling-place on solid ground; but like a homeless bird to go from light to light in a great darkness ... and never to love or be loved but that it will be taken away at dawning ..." He had considered it very poor prose indeed, and thought to have forgotten it. *True enough, when one considered, he thought. True enough, but it does not matter, I have a home here on the Enterprise, and a family, almost. Men run starships ...*

His wife is bathing in the warm blood. She rubs her swollen abdomen and smiles slowly. "Daughter. My daughter."

"And no child of man."

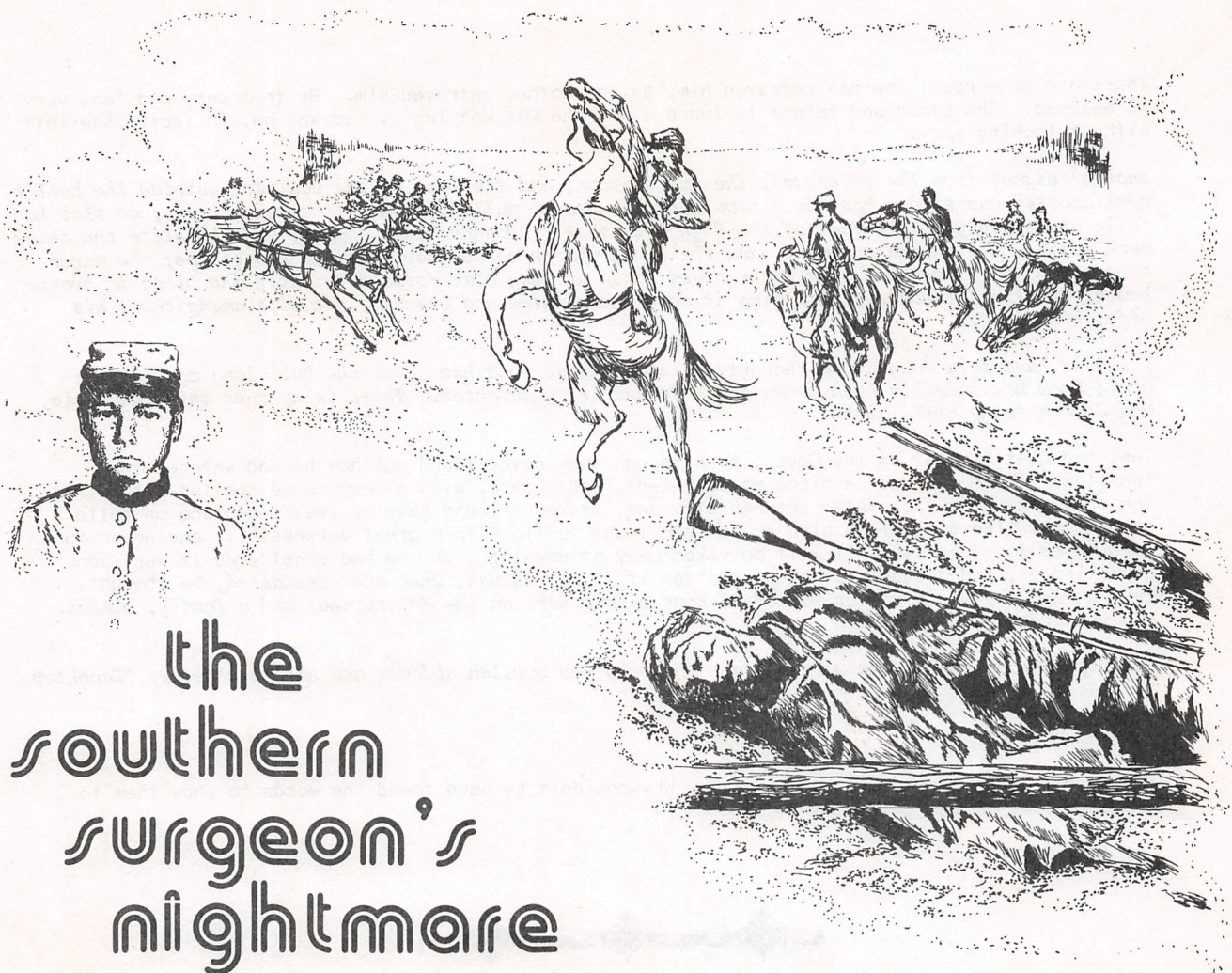
The pictures are very clear in his mind. Why couldn't he have found the words to show them to his child?

His child? ...



**Editor's note: I sent a few drawings to folk who write, in the interest of getting some unusual interpretations to include in this issue. It worked. "No Child of Man" is actually an interpretation of two drawings. Of the next four short stories -- excuse me, vignettes -- three are interpretations. The fourth (first?), "The Southern Surgeon's Nightmare", was an exception (the story came first and the illos followed), but it is included here because it fits in well with the overall themes of the interpretations.*

**The editor's note above is intended for those who are interested in causation, metaphysics and phenomenology. The rest of you can skip over it and read on if you wish. (Peasants!)*



the southern surgeon's nightmare

paula block

Tired? What's that? A word? A feeling? A human being? Christ yes I'm tired, thought the doctor. *There are too many men to take care of, too many men I can't take care of, but they keep bringin' them to me and they say 'Save 'em, Doc. Fix 'em up'. There are too many men willin' to settle for any chance at livin' I can give them, even if it means spendin' that life hobblin' around on stumps, remnants of arms and legs hacked off because there was no other way I could fix them.*

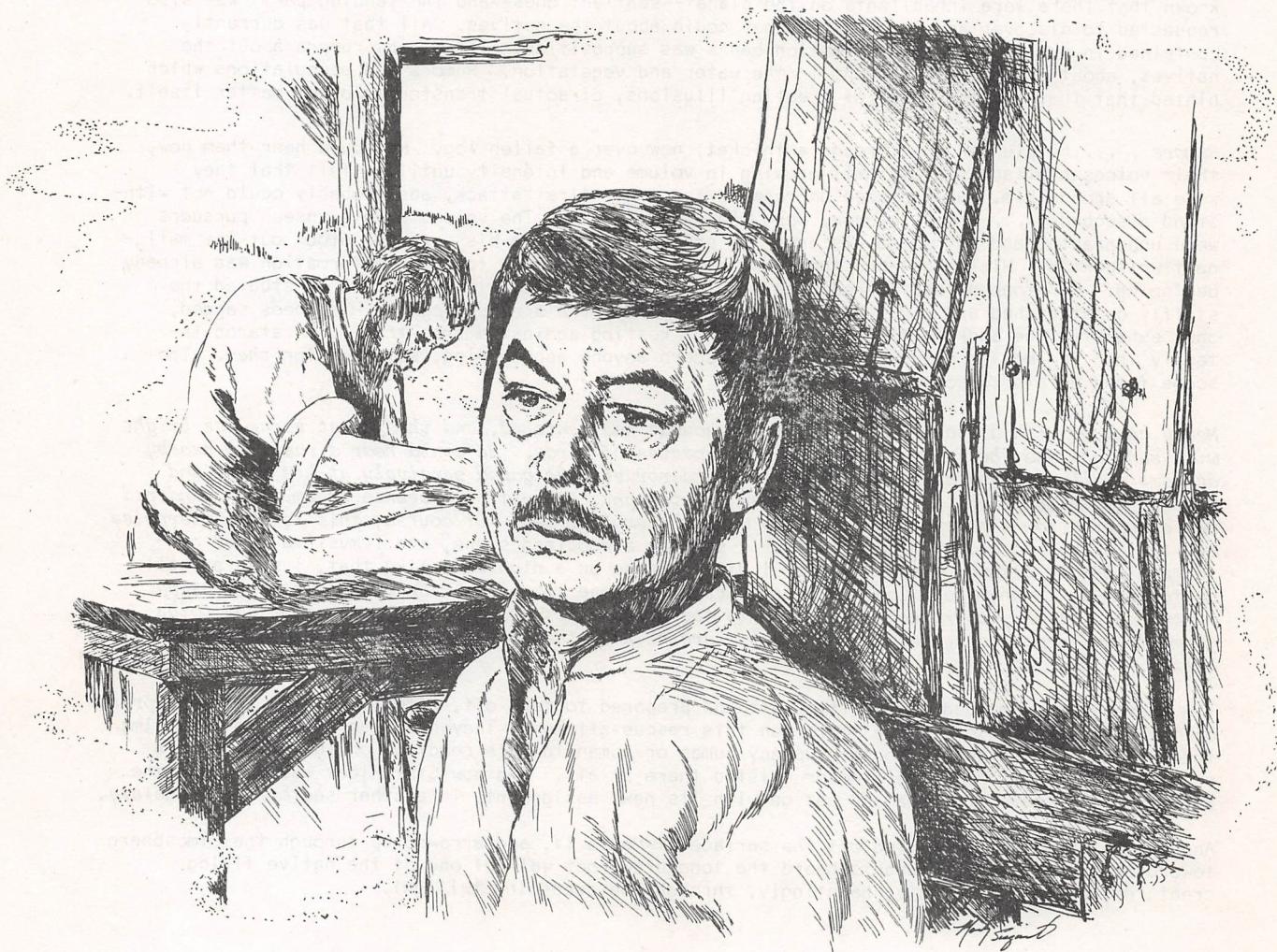
Ain't nobody here gonna hear me tellin' him he'll be good as new, ain't no little girls waitin' to have cut fingers kissed and bandaged, ain't no time to chew the fat awhile. There are too many men dyin' and there ain't enough of me to go 'round.

He tried to close his eyes for a few moments, even though he knew they'd never let him sleep. Not that it mattered. He saw them even with his eyes shut -- squirming bodies garbed in gray, stained in crimson. And he could not seal his ears; the moans and cries floated through the hot muggy air, mingling with the stench of rotting flesh, weaving a smothering web of agony. It was difficult to remember that somewhere outside there were still cool breezes blowing through blossomed trees. It would have been enough to be able to dream about sitting beneath one, lazily sipping on a julep or two. But there was no time to dream.

Time only for war. It was all that existed for him now; he had no past, no future. He had no identity but that of the army medic, the 'old country doctor' was just a ghost. He had no name but Sawbones, the other was forgotten. 'Fix 'em', that was his only command.

Cut and sew and cut and sew, he let it become a rhythm in his head, that made it easier. Patch together the flesh but don't look at the faces cause that'd slow him down. Don't let them be people, don't think about their pain. There was nothing he could do about that anyway. Keep them as clean as possible, and as warm as you can without enough blankets, and stop the bleeding and clamp together the gaping holes.

The thought that the war would eventually end was inconceivable to him. All he could pray was that they'd all kill each other off out on the field, instead of being brought in here to him, half alive. He didn't want to see anymore of them. He was a dried up shell of a man, empty of emotions, and every time he looked at another aching body and felt nothing inside he was more afraid. *I've lost my soul*, he thought. *I'll never get out of here. This here's my purgatory. But what in God's name did I ever do to deserve this kind of punishment?*



night

leslie hobart



He was running, his breath coming in short, wheezing gasps as he crashed blindly through the woods. Nighttime on this planet was dark; the moon's faint light only vaguely illuminated the trees and brush, transforming them into monstrous half-seen shapes which leaped out of the shadows as McCoy fled past. Occasionally he stumbled against the boles of the trees or caught his foot in the masses of roots interwoven throughout the forest floor, adding painfully to the aches and bruises he'd already sustained in his headlong flight. Each time it happened, he would scramble to his feet and keep going, all the while checking frantically over his shoulder for signs of pursuit. . . . *have to reach the beam-up point . . . find the rest of the landing party . . .*

It had seemed a routine enough assignment. Star Fleet wanted a survey done on a planet at the outskirts of the Federation, a planet about which virtually nothing was known. As part of the survey, Captain Kirk had ordered a landing party beamed down to the planet surface to reconnoitre the area and take more detailed readings than were possible from the ship. It was known that there were inhabitants on the planet--sentient ones--and the landing party was also requested to discover any information they could about the natives. All that was currently contained in the Federation information banks was supposition. There were rumors about the natives, about properties inherent in the water and vegetation. Rumors and speculations which hinted that they had the power of creating illusions, of actual transformation of matter itself.

Rumors . . . he plunged on through a thicket, now over a fallen log. He could hear them now, their voices sibilant, malevolent, growing in volume and intensity until he felt that they were all around him. He had been unprepared for their first attack, and probably could not withstand a second. . . . *must escape, warn the others . . .* The voices of his unseen pursuers were unbearable, and he raised his arms to press his hands to his ears and block out the malignant whispering. His hands--but they were no longer his hands, for a transformation was already beginning. He stopped short, breathing heavily, his eyes wide with horror as he studied the stiffly outstretched arm. *Oh, my God, it's too late, it's already begun.* His knees sagged, and, exhausted, he sank to the ground, his back resting against a tree trunk. He stared intently into the moving shadows, trying to discern anyone approaching, watching for *them*. The scene faded as his consciousness dimmed.

McCoy came to with a start. The whispering sounds had vanished, and the forest scene was bright with sunlight and the faraway songs of some species of birds. He could hear a rustling nearby as some small creature scurried through the underbrush. He gazed pensively at his arms, and gave an explosive sigh of relief. A dream, he thought, it must have been a dream. He pondered the situation for a moment, then came up with the explanation. Of course, this is the Enterprise and I'm in the rec room, which I obviously set for a woodland scene, and I must've dozed off for awhile-- He grinned --and whatever I did to bring on a nightmare like that, I sure as hell better not do it anymore! Could be nerve-wracking, done too often. He shuddered, in unhappy remembrance of the experience. And once is too often. He got up, brushed the dirt and twigs from his uniform, and headed for the spot where he knew the door and control console were located . . .

The search party boarded the shuttlecraft and prepared to take off, after notifying the *Enterprise* of their failure to locate the Doctor on this rescue attempt. They had been unable to find him; indeed, they'd been unable to pick up any human or humanoid life readings on their tricorders or sensors. It was as if he'd never existed there at all. And now Star Fleet was ordering the *Enterprise* to leave the area and get on with its next assignment, in another sector of the galaxy.

And as the shuttlecraft lifted off the surface of Meita IV, and arrowed up through the atmosphere toward open space, its occupants heard the long drawn-out wail of one of the native flying creatures, echoing forlornly, hauntingly, through the deepening twilight.



ain't no virgins

paula block



Well, the truth was that Doc McCoy had had way too much to drink that day and it hadn't helped to improve his mood at all. No, sir, not one bit. It was Gol dang blankety blank this and gol dang blankety blank that and blasted Starfleet regulations and son of a blankety blank Jim Kirk and as for Spock, well, he could just take those pointy ears of his and stick 'em where the moon don't shine and blankety blankety blank.

Oh, it had been a truly rotten day for McCoy and it was just fine with him that he could no longer remember the star date or the time or even, come to think of it, where the hell he was. Omicron? The Special Rec Room? East McKeesport? Hell, it didn't much matter in his state. It was pretty, that was all that mattered at the moment. Had trees. Had grass. Had one sun -- which was pink. *'Magine that -- pink.* Well, maybe it just looked pink to his bloodshot eyes.

Didn't see any wildlife. Not a rabbit or a prairie chicken or a sandbat or a buffalo. But why should he expect a buffalo?

Ain't no dinosaurs or buffaloes.

Or unicorns or dumb dodos.

They's all gone now, totally extinct, no matter if this here is Omicron or Rec Room Q or East McKeesport ... wherever that was (heard it's near Pittsburgh, though).

McCoy wondered dully if he was on shoreleave or if he was supposed to be on duty. He hoped the latter wasn't true -- he was liable to be courtmartialed if they found him in this condition -- although he wasn't exactly sure what the charge would be. Maybe too drunk. That was it. Bones McCoy got too drunk and his brain walked off and left him and he's sure as hell unfit for duty.

He shook his head in a futile attempt to clear it. Nope, definitely no brain up there. Didn't hear a thing rattling around. *Lord's my witness I'll never mix mescal with Saurian brandy again. This ain't even fun.*

He closed his eyes to shut out the pink sunlight and leaned back against the tree trunk he was sitting near. That didn't help too much -- it made him feel like the universe had turned into one big carrousel, which it was, come to think of it, but he sure was in no mood to ride ponies.

Clip clop, clip clop, clip clop. The sounds were coming from somewhere over to his left, but McCoy decided not to open his eyes. Probably wouldn't be anything there anyway. Or else maybe there'd be a giant caterpillar heading towards him, and boy, he was *sure* in no mood to see that. *'Worse than a giant rabbit.*

The clip clopping ceased but McCoy sensed that whatever had made the sound was still in existence and right close by. Then he heard a little snort and a little whinny and he thought, *Lord, that merry-go-round horse has come lookin' for me. I better not move a muscle.*

A warm, fuzzy muzzle brushed against his forehead and he thought to himself, *don't move now. Don't move. Horses have big teeth. Even carrousel ones. And theirs are wood.*

That muzzle nuzzled him a moment longer and he heard it sniffing around him softly. *What the hell is that thing looking for,* he wondered. Suddenly he could no longer stand keeping his eyes closed, and the blood-shot orbs rolled slowly open and focused unsteadily on the pair of dark brown eyes before him.

And there was something else they noted -- the thin delicate spiral of horn between those eyes. McCoy took in a sharp, involuntary breath at the sight of the exquisite creature before him. *My God,* he thought. *My God.*

The unicorn took one last sniff at the astounded human, then raised its silvery head and laughed. Well, maybe it was a neigh -- it sounded like a laugh anyway. A horse laugh, of course. With a shake of the shimmering mane, it turned and galloped off for the nearby woods.

"Well, I'll be a blue-eyed virgin," murmured McCoy, although he really wasn't. The unicorn knew that too.



mad dogs and earthmen

e. r. faddis



iving forever is an awful bore, take my word for it," the phoenix said. "Look at this fewmet. A bird can get damned tired of eating fewmets."

"What's a fewmet?" McCoy asked.

"Dragon droppings, that's what. Very nutritious, but you could even get tired of caviar after awhile, and fewmets are not caviar."

"You suppose they'd be safe for me to eat?" the Earthman asked. "I've been wanderin' around out here in the heat for a long time, dunno how long. Sure could use something in my belly."

"Suit yourself," the bird said.

"Actually, it's water I really need; these fewmets look pretty dry. I don't suppose you'd happen to know where I can find some water, would you?"

"Water? On Acolo? Surely you jest."

"Well how the hell do you live? What about the dragons? There must be water around somewhere. What else would you drink?"

The bird cocked its head, giving him an evil smirk. "Human blood," it said.

"Oh, knock it off, my head hurts too much for wisecracks."

"All right, all right. Dragons and phoenix are both immortal, so naturally we don't have to eat or drink or anything. I wouldn't have to eat fewmets, except that they keep my stomach from growling, and it really is easier to fly when you have some spare fuel burning."

"That sounds like a crock to me. I don't think you're really immortal."

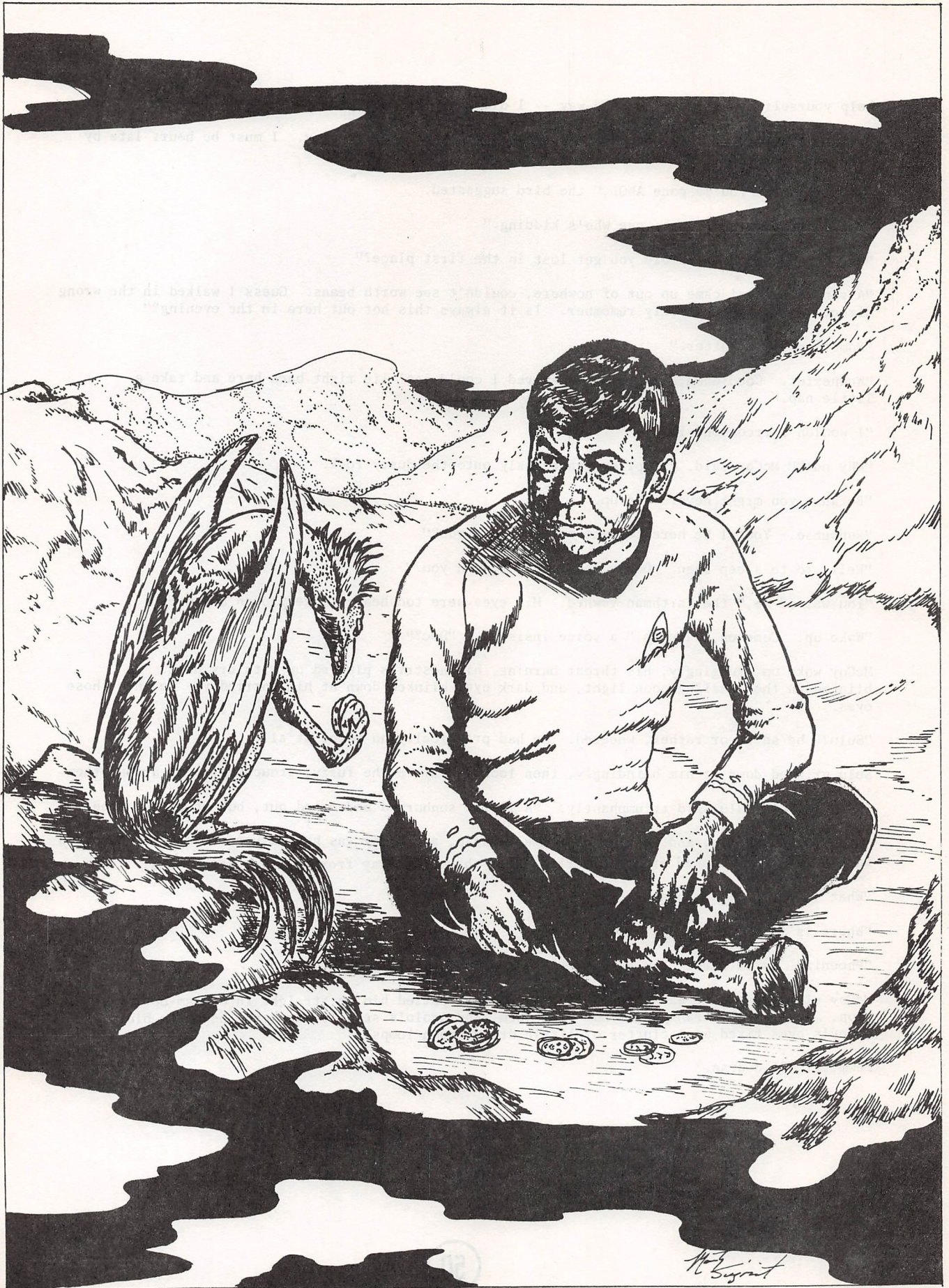
"What a rotten thing to say," the bird pouted. "Just for that, I'm going to pack up my fewmets and move elsewhere, and you can sit here all you want and insult the rocks."

"Hey, I didn't mean it. It's jes' that my head is poundin', and my feet are shot, and my communicator's busted, and I can't find the rest of the landing party I was with. Puts me in a damnable bitchy mood, but I don't mean any offense."

"Apology accepted. We phoenix are a magnanimous crew. Bet you weren't aware of just how civilized we are."

"No, can't say as I was. Never met a phoenix before."

"Aren't you pleased that I spotted you, then, and dropped by to share my dinner. Go ahead and



help yourself to a fewmets, by the way -- I did mean to offer you some."

"Thanks, but what I really need is to get back to the landing party. I must be hours late by now."

"They'll think you've gone AWOL," the bird suggested.

"On Acolo? Now you're the one who's kidding."

"How in the ten deserts did you get lost in the first place?"

"A sandstorm jes' came up out of nowhere, couldn't see worth beans. Guess I walked in the wrong direction. I can't exactly remember. Is it always this hot out here in the evening?"

"Sometimes it's hotter."

"Wunnerful. Good Ghod, I'm so damned tired I could jes' lie right back here and take a little nap."

"I wouldn't recommend it."

"Why not?" McCoy said, crumpling gracelessly onto the dusty rock.

"Because you might never wake up."

"Nonsense. You'll be here to wake me up, won't you?"

"Well, go to sleep then. Don't say I didn't warn you."

"You warned me," the Earthman yawned. His eyes were too heavy to keep open any more ...

"Wake up! Come on, wake up!" a voice insisted. "Doc?"

McCoy woke up grudgingly, his throat burning, his nostrils plugged up with dry dust. He blinked in the dazzling noon light, and dark eyes blinked down at him worriedly. He knew those eyes.

"Sulu?" he said, or rather, wheezed. He had practically no voice at all.

Sulu grinned down at him blindingly, then looked away to the fuzzy, crouching forms around them.

"He's alive!" Sulu said triumphantly. "A little sunburned and dried out, but otherwise fine."

Sulu dragged at him, and other hands came to help, and McCoy was hauled unceremoniously onto his wobbly legs. He looked around blearily, half-shrugging away from the supporting arms.

"What is it, Doc? Lose something?"

"Where is it? The phoenix."

"Phoenix? As in bird? You know there's no animal life on Acolo, Doc."

McCoy slumped, too tired to argue, and the others pulled him up straight into beam-up formation. Just as the transporter hum took them, and Acolo's sterile landscape began to blur, McCoy's eyes fixed on a clutter of little dried brown lumps.

Fewmets. Of course.





THE REAL

or

"What's a Nice Girl

Like YOU...?"



THE U.S.S. ENTERPRISE ORBITS THE PLANET ALARD

"Kyragarth channel open, Captain."

The most notable features of the Alardic leader were his eyebrows -- stiff, three-inch dark brushes on heavy brow ridges. They arched dramatically as he pointed a six-fingered hand and howled, "You!"

Some local greeting? thought Captain Kirk. He raised his arm uncertainly, but the Alard continued,

"Profanist! Temple desecrator! Thief and barbarian!"

Kirk arched his own eyebrows, a far less impressive act. Dr. McCoy, from behind and to the left of the command chair, said, "Who, me?"

"Alien scum and destroyer of wedded virtue!"

"Have you two met before?" Kirk asked his Chief Surgeon.

"I don't recollect them eyebrows, and they're hardly the forgettable kind."

Said facial ornaments writhed as Kydryk Vranmir thundered, "What has *the man* done with the Cingulum of the Gods?"

"Ah, er, I'm sure this is just an innocent misunderstanding," Kirk said weakly, stalling for time and hoping for enlightenment -- or the cavalry -- to come soon. "What was it that you said has been . . . lost?"

"If you do not give us *the man* and our sacred treasure," the Kydryk said darkly, "Alard goes to the Klingons."

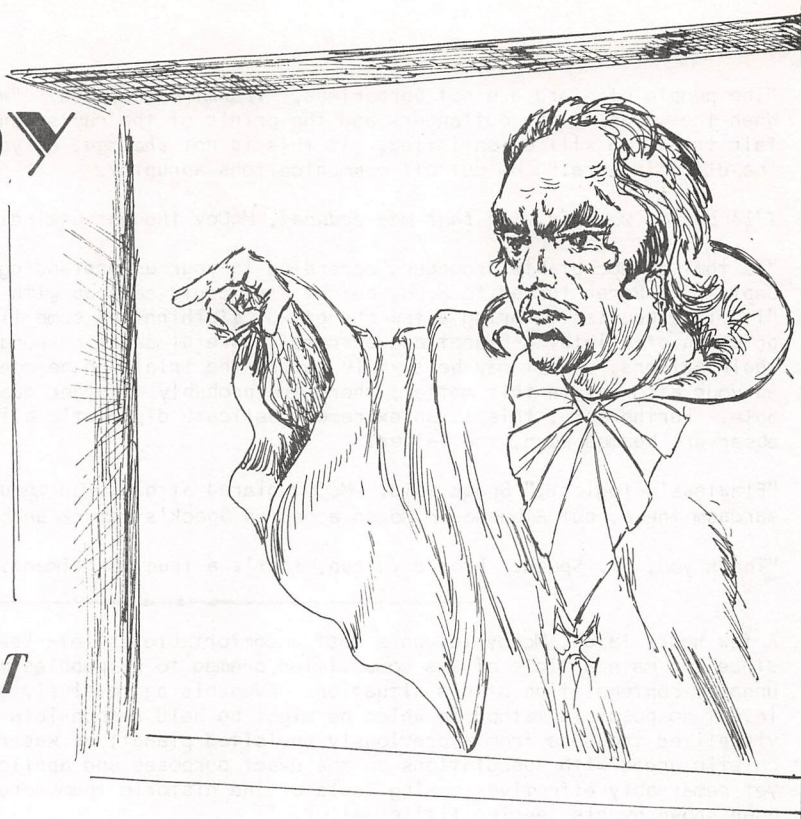
Ambassador Roren put a heavy hand on McCoy's shoulder. To Kirk he said, "Give them the doctor."

McCoy's jaw dropped.

McCOY

LESLIE

HOBART



"Now wait -- I mean --" Kirk began, "-- you know that's against Star Fleet policy." There is no point in angering the most powerful bureaucrat in the galaxy, even if he is a little hasty in his decisions.

Spock had been surveying (enjoying, McCoy would claim) the dramatic tableau from his post. He stepped down into the range of the screen and said neutrally, "What is the cingulum you speak of?"

Vranmir scowled. "*The man* who stands in the position of favor behind your commander stole -- from our great temple -- that which was given to the Alards by the Old High Race. This was two great sins. Also, he seduced and misused the naive wife of a high official to gain entry to the temple . . . another sin; for each of the three, death is the penalty. If we are not given *the man* and our sacred Cingulum, we take our dilithium ore to the enemies of the Federation." He leaned back with the air of a man who has presented the high card of an evening's game. "We want him now."

"When did these crimes -- sins -- take place?" the Federation Ambassador snapped. The Kydryk gave a long and poetical local dating which Roren translated quickly.

"Either eighteen or nineteen days ago. Can you account for your movements at that time, Doctor? Would there be any record of his actions, Captain Kirk?"

"I fervently hope not!" McCoy had been waiting with a bemused expression as two self-interested strangers negotiated on his future. He managed a sketchy grin and finished, "I was on Wrigley's Pleasure Planet for R and R"

"Good. There will be the planetary management's log to show your arrivals and departures; can you arrange for copies in triplicate to be beamed to the *Enterprise*, Captain? I'm sure that *if the doctor tells the truth* about his trip, our esteemed allies of fruitful Alard and the inestimably beautiful city Kyragarth will allow that he has been confused with some other worthless starlighter. Is this not so, Kydryk Vranmir?" Roren finished smoothly.

His intonations snapped McCoy out of his meek middle-class acceptance of the inevitability of authority into awareness of just *whose* fate was being decided. The surgeon almost snarled, "I don't care for your tone of voice, Roren. I don't lie for a living, like some --"

"Wrigley's Planet keeps *records* on visitors?" Kirk broke in, aghast.

"The people of Alard are not barbarians," Vranmir announced. "We will take custody of *the man*. When the words of the outlanders and the prints of the rapist and profanist are examined in a fair trial, we will be satisfied. If this is not *the man*, as you claim, then we will talk about the dilithium ore." He cut off communications abruptly.

I'll bet it was his wife that was seduced, McCoy thought unkindly.

"Is that an acceptable procedure according to your understanding of the codes of the Federation, Captain?" Roren turned to McCoy before Kirk could come up with a sufficiently biting reply. "It might be wise to bring a few changes of clothing and some light reading, Doctor. The proprietors of Wrigley's Planet are extremely careful about responding to requests for data on their patrons, and it may be a while before the trial can be convened. I, of course, will act as your attorney in this matter; there are probably no other qualified Federation lawyers available. Furthermore, this is an extremely delicate diplomatic situation: the fewer untrained observers beamed down, the better."

"Flawlessly logical," Spock said. McCoy glared at him. He thought he almost detected a hint of sarcasm there, but Ambassador Roren accepted Spock's remark unabashed.

"Thank you, Mr. Spock. From a Vulcan, that's a true compliment."

A few hours later, McCoy lay on a most uncomfortable pallet--"bed" it could hardly be called, since the main article of its composition seemed to be pebbles mixed with broken glass--lost in unhappy contemplation of his situation. Even his aggressively guilt-seeking conscience could invent no possible method in which he might be held responsible for the theft of an imperfectly visualized treasure from a previously unvisited planet; he was reduced to titillating his masochistic urges with speculations on the exact purposes and applications of the very primitive yet remarkably effective-looking tools of the historic thumbscrew-and-iron-maiden type he had been shown by his leering little jailor.

Said minion of justice was currently occupied in flirtation with a giggling female who had just minced her way down into this dungeon fastness. In keeping with some kind of Alardic high-fashion ideal, her bleached brows had been shaped into two little curls dangling at the outer edges of her eyesockets: when she blinked, the curls swayed across her eyes in a manner the jailor seemed to find irresistibly provocative. Since the Alardic language was relentlessly punctuated with the most incredible brow quirks and flourishes, she had any number of opportunities to demonstrate her skill. McCoy abandoned his speculations on rack-and-boot confessions in professional considerations of the number of eye strain cases traceable to this unique social invention. So wooed from his wallowing self-pity, he further wondered how seventy pounds (including filth) of weedy malnutrition could attract such a woman: apart from the eyebrows and the extra fingers, Alards resembled Terrans closely enough to satisfy anyone but a pathologist, and the girl with the elaborately shaped brows was attractive, strikingly attractive, and dressed to demonstrate that fact without seeming over-anxious to provide proof.

Eventually she and the prison employee seemed to come to an agreement about something; she led him off down the corridor towards the exit. When McCoy could no longer follow their progress from his position on the cot, there came a sharp smell strongly reminiscent of a barbeque. The woman returned alone, looking both competent and satisfied, and unlocked the door to the cell with the great unwieldy key the jailor had been wearing a moment before.

"Come, and hurry," she told him calmly.

McCoy blinked. "But--wait--I mean--I can't--"

She did not argue, or even change expression; from some secret pocket in an outfit so form-fitting that he would have considered it impossible to hide a decicredit for a phone call, she pulled a large and illegal burner. She pointed it at the doctor with a negligent ease expressing long practice and much skill in its use.

He changed his mind. It might have seemed reasonable to wait patiently while Kirk and Roren found some safe legal method of extraditing him, but if the Alards couldn't even police their own dungeons ...

He picked up his suitcase and followed her meekly.

The streets of "glorious Kyragarth" were all somewhat narrow, noisome, and unattractive to the civilized sensibilities of a Federation citizen, but this (McCoy was sure) was not a *good* part of town. His rescuer had not looked back to him since they reached this area of unlovely sights and worse smells, but on consideration he doubted his ability to survive alone in this strange and primitive city, or even to find his way back to the stronghold where he had been imprisoned.

I am, he told himself as he followed meekly, *a doctor, not a navigator.* And at the back of his mind was that smell of roasting meat and the charred spot on the stone wall as he followed this inexplicable young woman to, he hoped, freedom.

He was beginning to tire of the monotonous filth and decay and drabness of this place long before the woman stopped at a hut indistinguishable (to him) from its crowding neighbors. There seemed to be a secure system of locks, however, and when she finally threw back the door and gestured him in ahead of her, he was surprised to find himself in a room as modern and well-designed as his own cabin aboard the *Enterprise*.

There were good chairs, a soft bed, and synthesizers to provide good food and quite commendable wine. Encouraged by the last, towards the end of their meal McCoy worked up the courage to ask, "Miss? Why are you doing all this for me? When can I--"

The girl shook her head. "Leave? Not yet. It's not safe. I'm afraid you're going to have to trust me when I tell you that this is the best course of action."

"But when they find me gone--and my captain, he'll--"

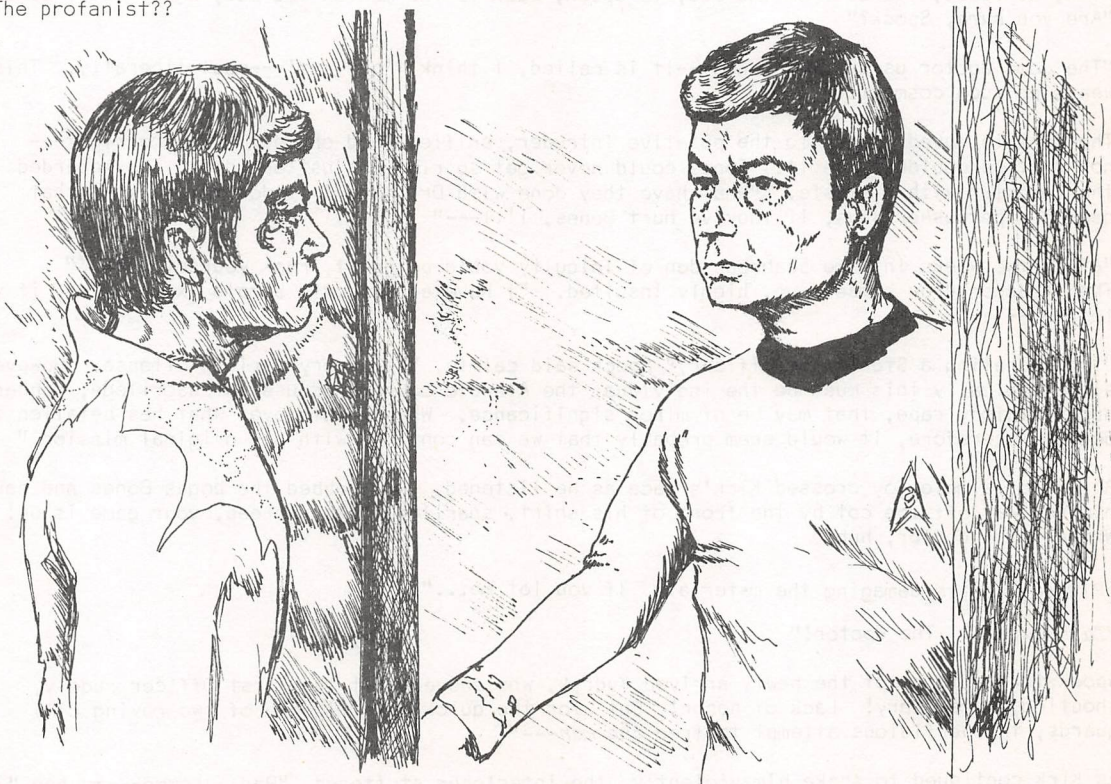
She looked amused. "Come now, you'll surely admit that my accommodations are rather better than those of your last host's? Trust me; it will be all right if you just follow my instructions." She stuffed the remnants of their dinner into the disposer and prepared to leave. Her words were warm enough, but there was no real interest in McCoy as a person; he felt like a recalcitrant lab animal who was interfering with an important procedure he was too slow to understand.

His new superintendent pulled the door open. Turning back, she said, "Whatever happens, don't let anyone--*anyone*--in. I should be back in an hour or so, and you'll sleep aboard your ship tomorrow if this works out well. Meanwhile, there's a bed in the other room if you'd like to nap." McCoy heard the locks click into place as she exited. He decided it was just as well he hadn't been given the chance to ask what would happen if things worked out *badly*.

Shortly after she left, his gloomy and somewhat confused contemplation of recent events was interrupted by a hesitant rapping on the door. He ignored it, uneasily. It continued, and got stronger. Finally, losing patience, the doctor strode to the single window for a look at this intruder, and came face to face with--*himself*?

His twin. His double.

The profanist??



McCoy let him in, silently. The stranger dropped the case he was carrying, stripped off his artificial eyebrows with a wince, and studied him with some distaste.

"I didn't think I looked so *old*," he said peevishly. "It's the *strain*. These dreadful facial excrescences are *impossible* to fake gracefully."

McCoy, still stunned by the unexpected appearance of his mirror image, was trying to decide on a logical course of action. It made his head hurt. Shock, relief, satisfied self-vindication, and a certain pique chased through his mind without helping him to reach a reasonable conclusion. "But who *are* y--no, I guess--I mean, I can understand--(he thought of his jailor)--but why? did you really?--what the hell is going--"

"Don't *babble*, dear man. I suppose when you collect your wits you'll want me to come back with you to your nice clean ship full of outstanding citizens."

Presented with this sterling alternative, McCoy brightened. He straightened his sagging shoulders, stuck out his chin, and said, "True. Of course. Though I suppose we could delay long enough for you to ..."

The imposter had a phaser---an old, outdated model, but nothing to argue with. "Now you know," he said gently, "I really can't allow you to do any such thing."

The last thing McCoy remembered was a great feeling of outrage that his trust and hospitality should be so abused by one who was walking around passing himself off as Leonard McCoy.

The doppelganger regarded the unconscious surgeon almost sadly. After a moment he sighed, knelt, and began to strip his victim. Redressed in the Star Fleet uniform, he picked up the little suitcase and departed, pulling the door shut behind him.

Spock stepped through the door of the cell, stopped dead, and said to Kirk, "This is not Dr. McCoy."

The man in the Star Fleet uniform swung his feet off the bed and sat up. "Come now, are you *that* disappointed?"

Kirk, confused, looked from the bed, to Spock, back to the man on the bed, and finally asked, "Are you *sure*, Spock?"

"The good doctor uses a fragrance---it is called, I think, 'bay rum'---most liberally. This man wears no such cosmetic."

The Captain moved closer to the putative intruder, sniffed, and choked. "You're right---not that he couldn't use it. Bones could never get so ripe in just one day." He regarded the imposter with distaste. "What have they done with Dr. McCoy? I don't care what that damned paperpusher says, if they've hurt Bones, I'll---"

"After two weeks in some scabrous den of iniquity you'd be pretty rank yourself, *sir*!" The stranger drew himself up, highly insulted. "I have a perfectly simple explanation, if you'll let me---"

"Impersonating a Star Fleet officer," Spock said calmly, "is a very serious offense. However, since logically this must be the individual the Alardic council accuses of sacrilege, robbery, and statutory rape, that may be of minor significance. When we discover what has befallen the doctor, therefore, it would seem probably that we can continue with our original mission."

A look of simple joy crossed Kirk's face as he listened. He grabbed the bogus Bones and hauled him halfway off the cot by the front of his shirt, snarling, "Okay, creep, your game is up! Where's the doctor, huh?"

"Please, you're damaging the material. If you let me..."

"*Talk*, creep! The doctor!"

Spock turned to greet the newly arrived Kydryk, who shoved past the First Officer rudely, shouting, "Treachery! Lack of honor! But for the quick intelligence of two roving city guards, the perfidious attempt to free *the man*---"

As Kirk continued to shake him violently, the interloper stuttered, "Bag. Lemme---my bag."

The captain released him reluctantly. "McCoy" knelt and pulled the suitcase from beneath the bed with a flourish.

"Fortunately, those ruffians failed to purloin my possessions. I have here, in this bag--." his voice changed from oration to astonishment as he rummaged frantically through the contents of the case, "...several sets of clean skivvies and a torn copy of *Gone With the Wind*?"

A great silence had fallen. He shuddered.

"Wrong bag," he moaned. "Took the wrong *bag*."

Kirk moved forward, intending to bash him a good one. The suspect substitute avoided his grip with an ease that bespoke of long practice and said very sadly, "Now your friend is *really* in trouble..."

THE PLOT THICKENS...

McCoy woke and found himself staring at yet another set of bars. The room beyond the bars was in far better shape than last night's cell, and his new keeper could have made seven or eight of the late little-mourned Alard specimen. Bones sat up woozily, contemplating this melanistic mugatu-type, who responded by grunting, grinning, and reaching a hairy hand into its pelt-tight pinstriped jumpsuit to scratch its crotch.

"Well. Hello."

The subhuman displayed its fangs happily.

"All right---just this once I'll make a concession to tradition. Where am I?"

It didn't bother to answer; but stumbled off through a convenient dilating doorway. McCoy regarded it gloomily; the Alards weren't supposed to be so technologically advanced. He wondered if his new prison could be a spaceship---despite the legends, he'd never been able to identify recycled air with only his nose as an instrument, but he sniffed hopefully anyway.

"Welcome back, McCoy."

The beast was back, and it had brought along *its* keeper, a squatty little man who looked like a husky seven-footer who'd been hammered down into a five-foot cube. But at least he spoke English. Sort of.

"You know who I am? Great. But who the hell are you?"

"Still got ya *sensa* humor. That's nice. Tell me a funny story about da necklace."

"Necklace?"

The dwarf looked at him sadly. "Ha. Ha. So I laughed. Gimme the story *awreddy*."

"Sir, I am a Federation citizen and a Star Fleet officer, and if you think you can get away with this kind of barratry---"

"Not *funny*, McCoy. Not funny *enough*. Bert, the suitcase."

From somewhere about its person the beast produced a small black satchel.

"Okay, McCoy, it's your bag, right?"

McCoy squinted. "I think so. Did you find it in the same place you found me?"

"Yeah, it's his. Open it, Bert."

Bert rammed an unclean index fingernail between the two halves of the suitcase shell and levered it apart with a great noise of snapping hinges. He turned the violated satchel over, and his boss held out a misproportioned palm to catch the contents: one piece of jewelry, either a huge necklace or a small girdle, made of what looked like precious stones joined with fine silver rings. Random jewels gleamed with an intense special radiance, as if lighted from within.

"What necklace?" he asked me. God, what a crook! You lie just to keep in practice, doncha."

The doctor couldn't take his eyes off the band. "What happened to my copy of *Gone With the Wind*?" he managed to gasp.

"Dat's good. Gone wit da wind." The little gangster chuckled. "Somebody don't start singin' about dis necklace priddy quick, he's gonna go wit' the wind, all right. How come this piece a' ice is worth gettin' a whole mudball fulla *vz*-olence freaks afta ya ass, McCoy?"

"The cingulum of the gods. Good Lord." McCoy was lost in wonderment at the unfairness of coincidence.

"He recanizes it at last! Okay, priddy boy, what's the word?"

"Suh, there's been a terrible mistake made." McCoy's southern accent was creeping back under the stress. "I'm not the man who took this thing; Ah'm jes' a simple country doctor, not a --"

The dwarf shook his head regretfully. "A mistake, he says. It's *always* a mistake to cross your Uncle. McCoy, I love you like you was my firstborn son, the one who would be alive and healthy today if he hadn't tried to screw his old man over once too often, but if you don't come up with a better story -- soon -- I'm gonna hafta get Bert to break both yer arms."

He started for the doorway with his henchman trailing after. There he swung around and repeated, "Think about the necklace -- son. An' if you ain't changed ya mind when I come back, afta Bert finishes wit' you I by God *am* gonna give you back to the Feds -- along with the tapes on the Mazal scandals, and the marked currency from Ivor, and the story you told about what you an' that loser Mudd almost managed to pull off on Wellbegun."

MEANWHILE, BACK AT THE RANCH

The preliminary hearing had been convened aboard the *Enterprise*, at Ambassador Roren's request. The Kydryk was reacting so rabidly to this second loss of the sacred cingulum that even Kirk could understand Roren's reasoning. Present for the hearing were the doppelganger-McCoy, Kirk, Spock, Roren, Vranmir, and an Alard lackey dressed in black who had been introduced by the Kydryk "in case *the man* decides to be difficult." For the computer records, Spock asked the defendant,

"Your full name?"

He sighed. "McCoy, believe it or not. Cagney Bogart McCoy." Kirk gave him a suspicious look, and he added, "My mother was an amateur classicist. She named me after a couple of minor idols from back in the Dark Ages."

Spock said, "The veridicator indicates that the defendant is presenting the truth . . . as he knows it."

Kydryk Vranmir, apparently growing bored with the niceties of legal procedure, leaned across the table and snapped, "Where is the Cingulum of the Gods?"

The prisoner regarded him with an air of cultured distaste and wounded dignity. "How *marsupial*! I take it your little -- ah -- *friend* brought the *Rope*?"

The lackey was not supposed to understand English. He produced a length of heavy chain and slammed it on the table for display, with the self-denigrating simper of one who merely performs his job to the best of his ability. Roren gave the Kydryk what in less official circumstances would have been a dirty look.

Kirk had managed to convince himself that he was a simple, honest, and much-put-upon man. His ship had been overrun with the lowest sort of double-tongued diplomatic scum; his best friend was missing and presumably in danger; and these half-civilized native types were attempting to make trouble for him with his superiors (planet-bound bureaucrats and pencil-pushers all) by speaking of Klingons and otherwise violating the canons of good taste. Exasperated past the limits of even his own extremely flexible interpretations of Star Fleet rulings, he stood and shouted, "*Enough!*"

It got him the silence he wanted. "Why the hell," he asked C.B. McCoy, "did you take the god-damned whateveritis?"

C.B. looked approval. "At last, an intelligent question."

"So give me an intelligent answer."

The Federation ambassador appeared to be undergoing cardiac arrest. Neither Kirk nor the defendant paid him any attention.

"This . . . cingulum," C.B. began in his best declamatory manner, "this . . . treasure; this

sacred symbol, this unsurpassed *objet d'art* . . ." he noticed that Kirk was becoming restive. "But then you've never seen it, have you? Pity. Anyway, it's a map."

Kirk considered this and found it acceptable. "Of what?"

"Ah!" C.B. grinned. "I took up -- er, became acquainted with -- the renowned archeologist Sir Fredrick Phrandelles at his dig on Ramses VII."

(Kirk, no innocent himself, vowed silently to look up the records of unsolved scams on planets of the Ramses system.)

"He had a number of convincing leads pointing to the existence of a really *big* Starseeder treasure, mapped on a piece of jewelry then in a temple on an unimportant" -- Vranmir gasped -- "planet well off the main routes of the Big Six. As I'm sure you gentlemen know, the Star-seeders were apparently colonizing planets all over the galaxy long before Earth even came into existence; and besides their unique anthropological status as the oldest, most technologically developed race in all history, such artifacts as have been discovered are of great *scientific* interest to the Federation and the other stellar unions."

"Indeed," Spock murmured. Unobtrusively, he began to tap out a request for information on Starseeder devices currently under study on the computer console. Greed -- simple, scientific, and otherwise -- was as palpable as a perfume in the air.

"Unfortunately, the silly -- ah, Sir Fredrick -- was too busy with the investigation on R-7 to pay proper attention to the significance of his conclusions. I managed to obtain the data on the planet where the jeweled map was presumed to be --"

"Rifled the files," Kirk added firmly.

"-- and set off for Alard --"

"On a ship not your own, I'll bet."

C.B. glared at him. "*Honestly* -- if you *recognize* that word -- Captain Kirk; is this *your* story, or mine? Although I am only *too* willing to change places with you, if you think you can tell it better . . ."

His new bed was a great improvement over the primitive Alardic cot, but McCoy wasn't sleeping any better. He was trying to calculate the exact amount of force Bert could exert, and how long it would take the brute to snap bones.

He looked up, his reverie cut short by the sound of the dilating doorway widening. The exaggerated eyebrows were reduced to delicate, simple arcs, and the brilliant barbaric Alardic costume changed for a floor-sweeping white skirt and two golden cups shaped like coiled snakes, but he knew his rescuer.

"No," he said in disbelief. And, as she punched the coding to open the cell, "No! Help! Kidnap! Murder! Rape! *Help!!*"

The beep of the desk communicator cut into the argument between the Kydryk of Alard, hot to avenge the desecration of his peoples' sacred fetish, and the Federation ambassador dreaming of the mechanical marvels of the Lost Race. Kirk punched the acknowledge button, and Uhura appeared on the unit screen.

"Captain, there's a scout ship locked on course with the *Enterprise*. The pilot of the vehicle insists that he must talk with you . . . he says he has news of the chief surgeon, sir."

Kirk's attention, it must be said in his favor, was instantly distracted from fantasies of gold and glory. At his barked command, the unlovely visages of the Uncle and Bert appeared on the small screen.

The smaller man smiled. "Captain. I knew you'd wanna lissen to me, I got nothin' but respect for you Federation people . . ."

"I was told you mentioned Doctor McCoy. If you know his whereabouts, Star Fleet -- and I -- would be grateful for the information." Kirk could not place these two deviant strangers, but he was not inclined to respect anything smaller than a battle cruiser, and he had a personal theory that the dignity of the Federation would be damaged if more than impersonal courtesy were offered to every unimportant stranger with an ax to grind.

But the Uncle was not to be deterred by mere coolness. "Real respect . . . if I could hire men like the Federation, or even you starship captains -- hell, in five years I could carve out a territory that -- but enough a' these personal things!" His voice took on a persuasive tone. "You wanna hear about your friend. Now, I'm just a businessman, I got my problems, just like you -- maybe you wooden think mucha *mine*, but ta me they're, y'know, big."

Roren said flatly, "He's soliciting a bribe."

"A bribe! Pu-leese! I may not be no hotshot bu-reo-crat, but I got my pride!" The squatty little man seemed about to break contact. "Also, I got yer docta -- at no small personal expense."

"All right. Wait," Kirk said. "If you do return my chief surgeon, I'm sure equitable . . . arrangements . . . can be made . . ." He thought fleetingly of what Star Fleet's reaction to ransoms, bribes and the like would be.

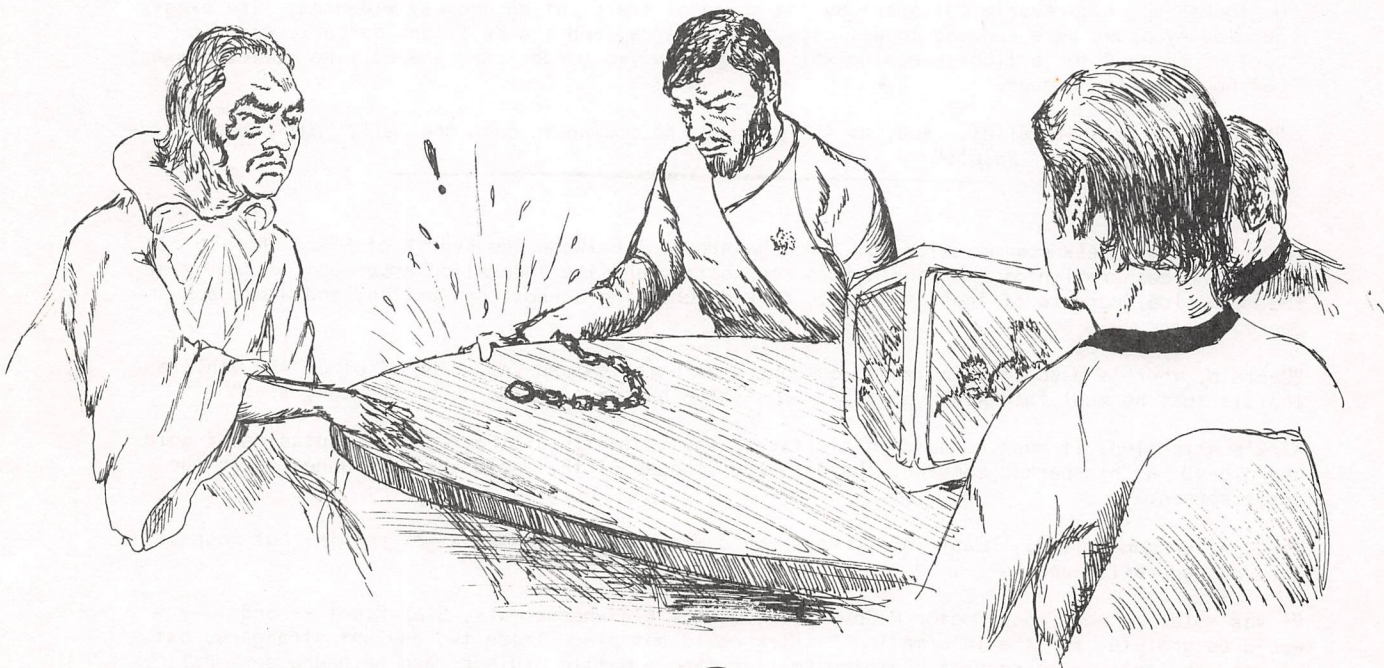
"Yeah. Y'know, you got smarts. Now, we're just small businessmen, we got a contract, *legal*, y'know? And we hear about this off-worlder loose where there ain't nobody s'pozed to be, right? So, a while back we lost a -- employee -- one of *us*, and we figure this could be our guy, right? An' we arrange to have him delivered. Only it's a mistake, not that we meant any harm, y'know, we're *businessmen*, no profit in behavin' like animals -- anyways, we got yer doctor, and we hear you found some *real human bein'*, that he ain't one a' *your* guys . . . now, we're loyal, and all, but lemme tell you it *costs* to get anybody off that lousy mudball, and we're just poor honest businessmen out to make a honest buck, so we can't just *give* him to you, much as we'd like ta, y'know, but since you seem to have got *our* man, we thought maybe we could --" he wrinkled up his lumpy face in what was undoubtedly meant for a friendly grin, "-- like, trade."

Kirk had been following this locution with difficulty. "You have Doctor McCoy?" he asked, finally.

The Uncle beamed. "Yeah, an' *you* got C.B. McCoy, who ain't no good to you, but -- business can be, like, cutthroat, there are spies everywhere -- *we* want him."

C.B., calculating quickly, shouted over the more-or-less restrained protestations of the diplomats, "No bargains, Captain! The man's a common *criminal*." As Kirk stared at him in disbelief, he added practically, "Besides, if he has the necklace, he has the necklace, and you'll notice he's made no mention of any chattel goods."

"Now, who do you wanna believe," the Uncle asked sternly, "two honest businessmen who come lookin' ta return ya crewman outa nothin' but *good will*, or some cheap sharpster who twenty-six planets that I know of would like to have a long serious talk with about one kinda dishonesty an' another?"



The Kydryk was again beginning to grow restive with the continued inaction; C.B. McCoy did not fail to notice that fact. "My dear Kydryk, I wonder if the good captain could arrange to have an individual beamed aboard that little craft," he said speculatively. Vranmir looked confused, until the defendant pointed at the lackey in black (still fondling the length of chain) and added, "*Your* dog could challenge *his* dog to a duel."

"Yes!" the Alardic councilor agreed joyously. "At last something *useful* to do, Captain!" He pointed at Bert's image on the screen, standing deferentially behind the image of his Uncle, and snarled a string of unintelligible Alardic orders at his own supporter. The wizened little torturer looked at his master in horrified disbelief. He pantomimed a quite good tableau of a hulking monster rending the limbs from a much smaller (albeit valiant) attacker, and threw himself on the floor, screaming negatives, one arm wrapped around the base of a table and the other clutching the Federation Ambassador's leg. Roren tried unsuccessfully to kick him away without seeming to notice his presence.

C.B. McCoy said scornfully, "*Your* dog is a goddamn *chicken*."

"Actually, you know, he doesn't have the doctor any more, much less the cingulum."

Two figures (previously unnoticed, what with one thing and another) had materialized in the room -- a very confused Dr. McCoy and the last speaker, a blonde and self-assured female. McCoy had merely thought, when he first saw her, *attractive and tastefully dressed*; Kirk's greater expertise allowed him to make a thorough and appreciative evaluation: *silky hair, good skin, nice figure, excellent carriage, probably athletic, expensive outfit, jewelled belt -- JEWELLED BELT?!?!!*

He'd had to look up "cingulum" in the computer records, but he'd grasped the idea. He made a half-hearted move to grasp the close-fitting cingulum also (she wasn't really his type, but it had been a dull month with no new passengers but Ambassador Roren and his all-male staff) and the woman pointed her burner casually in his direction.

The two "honest businessmen" were regarding the tableau unhappily. Bert said, in a squeaky, shrill little voice totally unsuited to his mass, "*Her*."

The Uncle nodded in sad agreement. "This whole caper," he added, "is for *shit*." He broke contact with the Federation vessel. It was reported later that the little scout ship had broken free of a hastily-engineered tractor beam without any sign of effort and had taken off around the curve of the planet at a suspiciously high speed.

Pandemonium reigned in the hearing chamber. Ambassador Roren smiled insincerely at the young woman. "Now that *that* very *unpleasant* scene is over, one can only assume, my dear --"

"Our *Cingulum*! You have *our* cingulum!" the Kydryk yelled. "We want --"

The blonde stranger, negligently handling her burner, shook her head. "*My* cingulum," she said firmly.

Kirk asked hopefully, "If the Federation sent you to recover --"

"As a priestess of the High Temple, of course you have the right --" Vranmir broke in.

"If in your role as an accredited agent of the --" Roren chimed sonorously.

C.B. threw in hopefully, "Didn't you used to be the Uncle's . . ."

The recipient of all this attention looked silently at Spock, still behind the computer console. He raised his eyebrows and refrained from comment. She turned to her unwilling comrade.

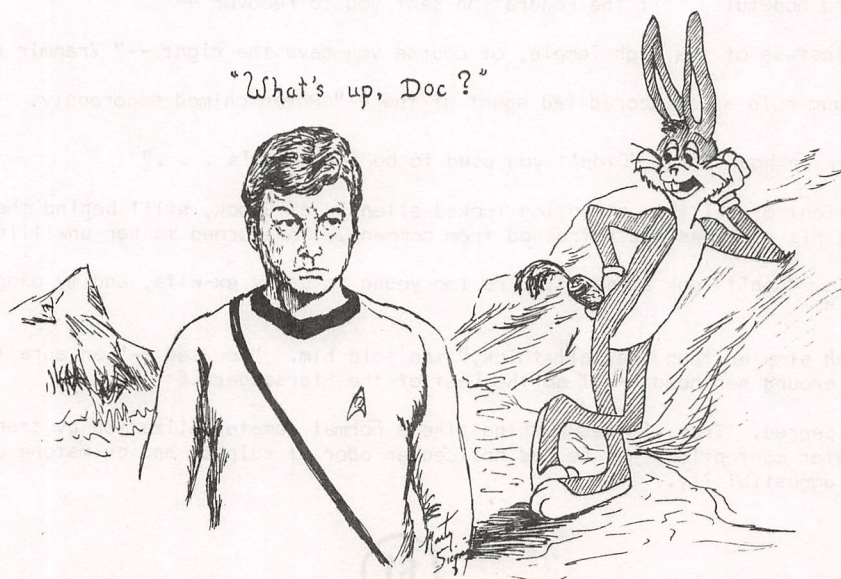
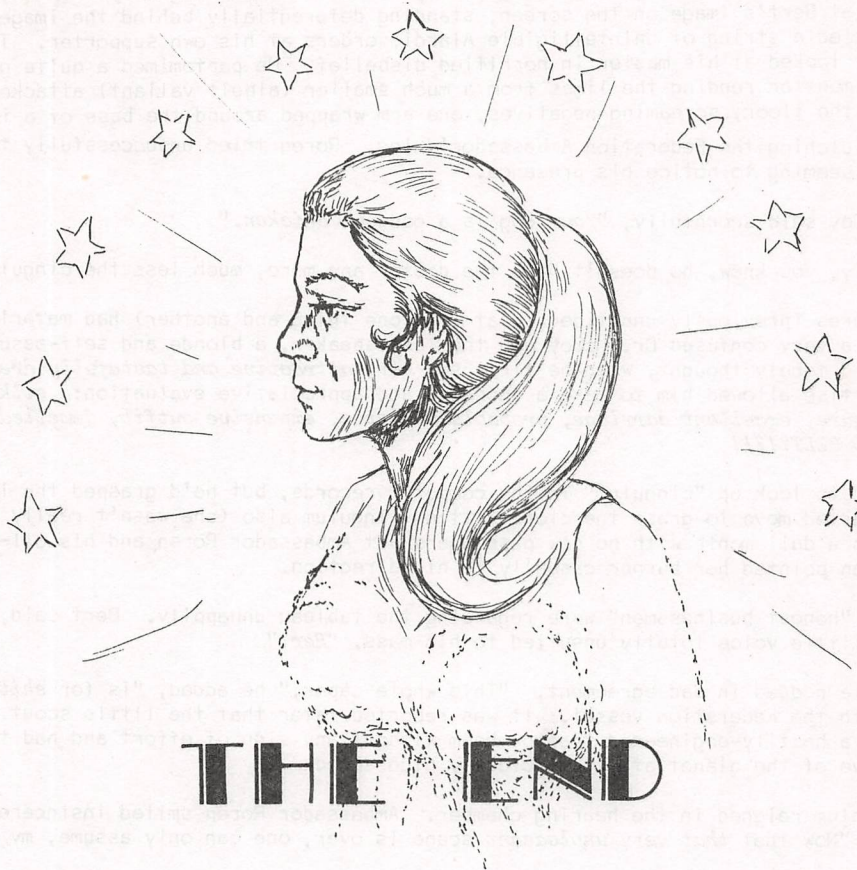
McCoy said, "Don't look at me. You're too young to be my ex-wife, and my daughter Joanna is a brunette."

"It's *much* simpler than they all think," she told him. "You see --" an aura like a halo of stars appeared around her head "-- *I* am the Last of the Starseeders."

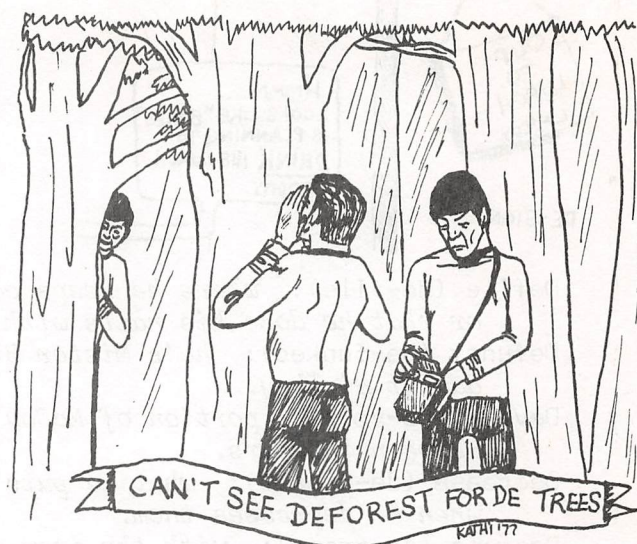
She disappeared. True, it was nothing like a normal dematerialization by transporter beam, but Kirk's later contention that he had noticed an odor of sulphur and brimstone can probably be laid to suggestibility.

The Kydryk and the Federation diplomat were both keening of retaliation and revenge. Spock fiddled futilely with the console keyboard. Unconsciously repeating the last words of the Uncle, the captain of the *Enterprise* said morosely, "This whole mission is for *shit*."

Dr. McCoy pulled himself out of the stunned semi-trance he had been in since his impromptu return "home", marched slowly across the room, and punched C.B. in the mouth.



DE= FUNITIONS

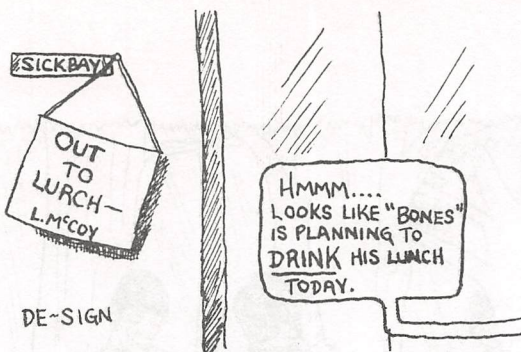


This little foray into admittedly incoherent insanity is what happens when several corresponding De Kelley fans (whose names are withheld to protect the guilty) start an impromptu contest in the "Can You Top This?" vein, using puns derived (*snicker*) from De's name and the myriad words in the English language that have that prefix. Be warned: it's habit-forming, and has a tendency to make one giggle or choke or whatever in the middle of perfectly innocuous (to the uninitiated) sentences. Reading dictionaries to find more words to destroy (*snicker*) is considered cheating by more discriminating De-punsters.

Delight (de-light): *it sits by de bed in de room.*
 Defenestrate (de-fenestrate): *gofers keeping trekkies away from De at conventions.*
 Deactivate (de-activate): *what he does when told 1,000 trekkies are headed his way.*
 Debauch (de-botch): *syn. "oops!"; when a) De's blown another line in filming; or b) the operation was not a success ...*
 Defend (de-fend): *warding off aliens, Spock, Kirk, cowboys or fen ... b) when once again the Enterprise has been zapped out of the area, when McCoy must survive by his own wits, i.e., fend for himself.*
 Dilute (de-lute): *obviously, his musical instrument.*



Deprivation (de-privation): *Spock gone so's he can't pick on him.*
 Declaw (de-claw): *fingernails if someone turns him into a cat.*
 Decatur (de-cater): *if he opens a restaurant ...*
 DeWitt (de-wit): *half of one is better than none??*
 Detroit (de-troit): *Ech!*
 Desire (de-sire): *his father.*



Defile (de-file): where he keeps case histories, or what he does his nails with.

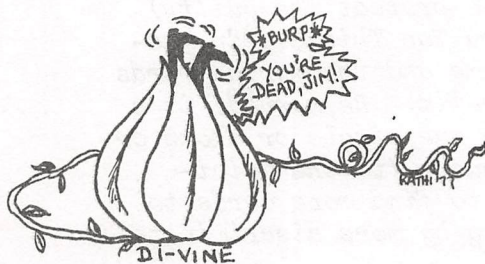
Defunct (de-funked): he's Mister Blue ... bad day at Sickbay.

Devoid (de-void): portion of McCoy's anatomy between the ears.

Decrease (de-crease): what he puts in clothes when he depresses them.

Depress (de-press): with the iron - see "decrease", above.

Demilitarize (de-militarize): when he goes into the armed forces.



DE-FUSE



Design (de-sign): when he autographs; or "Sickbay", or 'out to lunch'.

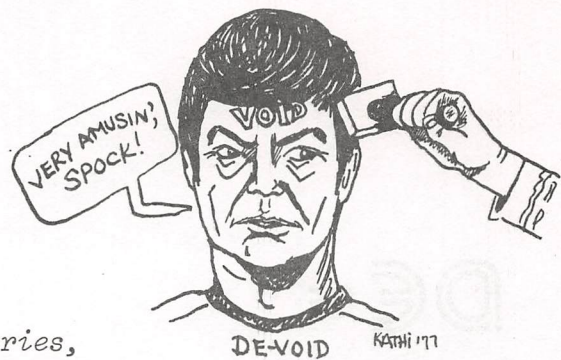
Divine (de-vine): new species of man-eating plant on Arkis IV; keeps saying, "You're dead, Jim."

Defuse (de-fuse): very short!

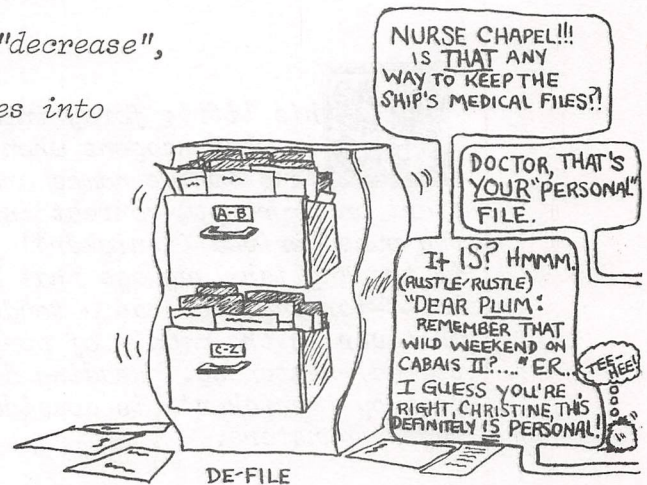
D-cell (de-cell): where he gets put when he's thrown in jail (see "define")

D-con (de-con): a) con with him as guest of honor.
b) pulling a fast one.

Defraud (de-fraud): see "D-Con" above.



DE-VOID KATHI '77



Deride (de-ride): De rides de horse ...

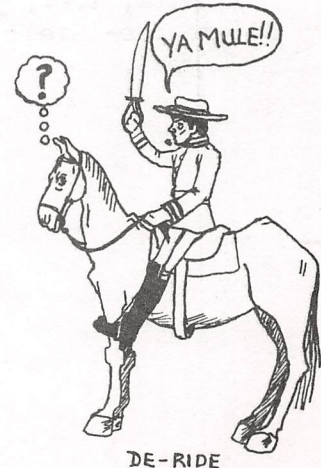
Delude (de-lewd): he's telling dirty jokes again.

Deny (de-nigh): when he's nearby.

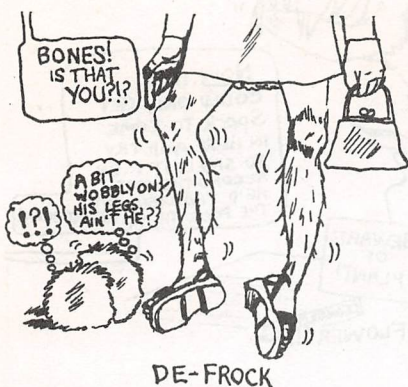
Defray (de-fray): when McCoy gets involved in yet another fight (then he must de-fend himself, no?)

Depend (de-penned): an autograph, or a letter he's written, is De-penned.

Depend (de-pond): hanging around again, i.e. the scene in "Waco" in which he gets to dangle from a balcony rail.



DE-RIDE



Defrock (de-frock): what he wears whilst imitating Klinger (M*A*S*H*) and trying to get out of Starfleet on a sec. 8.

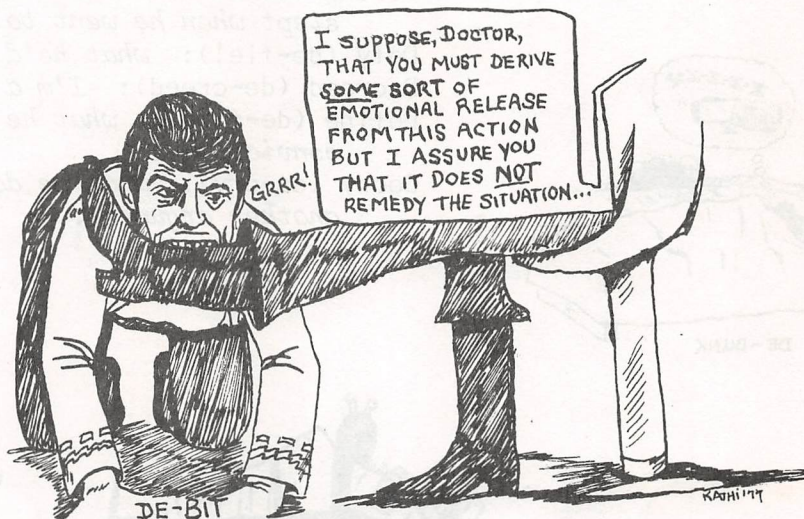
Derail (de-rail): scream at Spock, Kirk, Starfleet, or the universe-at-large.

Deform (de-form): when he tries his hand at sculpture.

Deface (de-face): well, that's obvious enough, isn't it?

Depict (de-picked): that's how he got the flowers that are in the vase on his desk.

Debase (de-base): No he's not!



Denote (de-note): a) writes them to friends.
b) middle "C".

Descent (de-cent): a) \$; if he's broke, he ain't got a red de-cent.

(de-scent): b) bay rum, to listen to Shana-anyway, his cologne.

Dement (de-meant): De meant what De said

Debit (de-bit): well, I suppose he could get mad enough to bite

Defer (de-fur): um...on his head...? (actually, it appears every time there's a full moon... along with fangs, claws and a tendency to sit on a hill and howl

Defame (de-fame): trekkies and western fans the world over know him (& love 'im)

Degenerate (de-generate): De generates mostly arguments on the show

Defoliate (de-foliate): he grew leaves?? (see "de-vine", above or somewhere)

Desegregate (de-segregate): the Captain tells him to go to his room (with no supper, even!)

Descend (de-send): to mail de note

Depart (de-part): a) in Star Trek, Dr. McCoy
b) in De hair

Delouse (de-louse): its name is Beauregard



Deflower (de-flower): uh ... he's got a vase full of them on his desk???

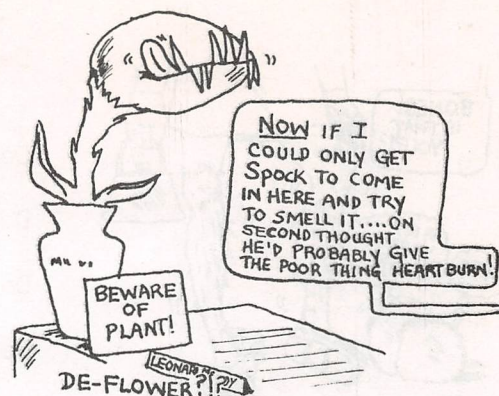
Denude (de-nude): when he's unlucky enough to become a centerfold.

Defrost (de-frost): either his condition in "All Our Yesterdays", or his chilly silence when he's mad and holding a grudge.

Dehydrate (de-hydrate): when he gets wet, or takes a drink.

Decalcify (de-calcify): well, haven't you ever wondered why he's called "Bones"??!!

Decriminalize (de-criminalize): he done a no-no ...



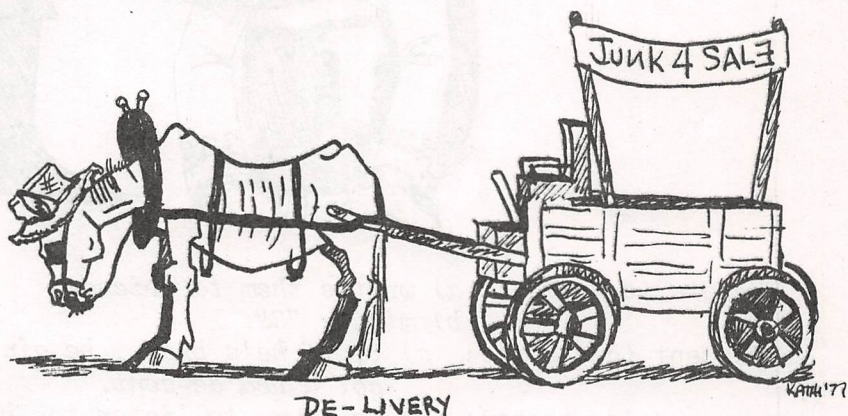
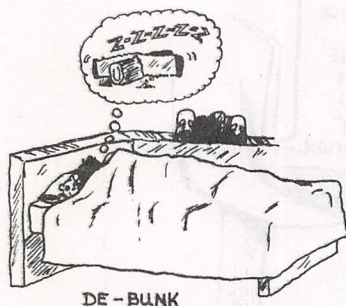
Debunk (de-bunk): where he sleeps (or where he slept when he went to camp as a boy???)

Defy (de-fie!): what he'd like to say to Spock.

Decreed (de-creed): I'm a doctor, not a ...

Define (de-fine): what he pays for a traffic conviction.

Decry (de-cry): what he does when Spock wins yet another argument.



Decoy (de-coy): (thay!) when McCoy's playing hard-to-get.

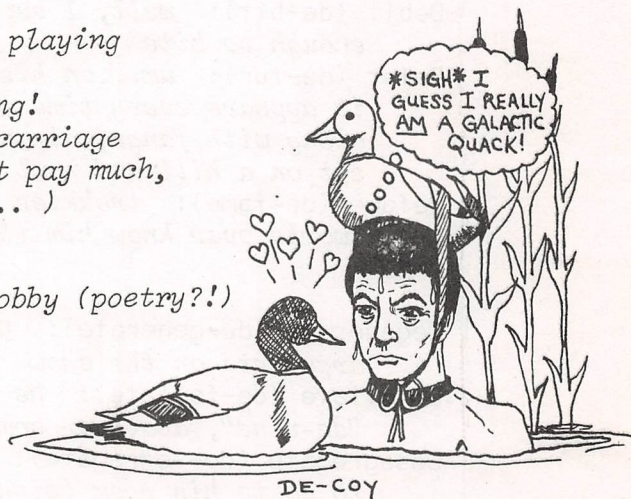
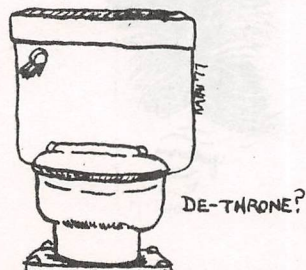
Detail (de-tail): think about it, gang!

Delivery (de-livery): his horse-and-carriage rental service (Starfleet doesn't pay much, and ya gotta get ahead somehow ...)

Dethrone (de-throne): where De sits.

Decode (de-code): probably Morse.

Decompose (de-compose): his latest hobby (poetry?!)



Defoe (de-foe): *in the series, generally Spock*
 Deport (de-port): *he keeps it in de bottle*
(Gallo Bros.)

Decant (de-can't): *antonym of "De can"*

Decanter (de-canter): *comes after de walk and de trot*

Depose (de-pose): *usually leaning on command chair on the bridge*

Despot (de-spot): *when De sees something, De spots it; synonym for disease (De sees)*

DE-BRAID



Debride (de-bride): *Carolyn.*

Debraid (de-braid): *on de sleeves of his uniform.*

Demote (de-moat): *around de castle.*

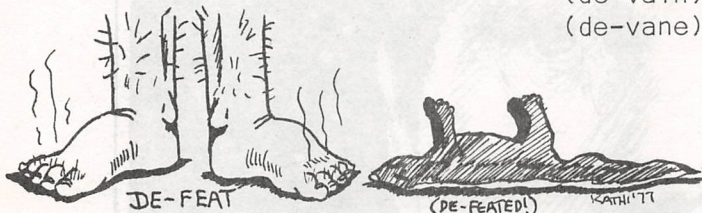
Demotion (de-motion): *what De makes whilst applying*
Roger's Rules of Order (ask your librarian!)

Devote (de-vote): *a) for survival in "Immunity Syndrome". b) see "demotion" above.*

Devein (de-vein): *a) in de body.*

(de-vain): b) fondness for mirrors and flattery.

(de-vane): c) tell which way the wind's blowing.



Defeat (de-feet): *he has two*

(de-feat): heroic deed, such as curing incurable illnesses in 55 minutes. Or putting up with Spock for the same amount of time

Defog (de-fog): *what he seems to wander about in much of the time*

Defensible (de-fenceable): *he makes a good foil*

Demand (de-manned): *Sickbay is De-manned*

Debrief:

Delay:

in the interest of keeping this zine G-rated, we ain't even gonna attempt these....

Depot (de-pot): *what he cooks his dinner in*

Derange (de-range): *where he heats up de pot he's cooking his dinner in*

Deranged: *what you'd have to be to put together a glossary as silly as this one*

Desecrate: *what we've just done to the poor man's name, for which we apologize (courteously)*

DE-FOG





Sonnets

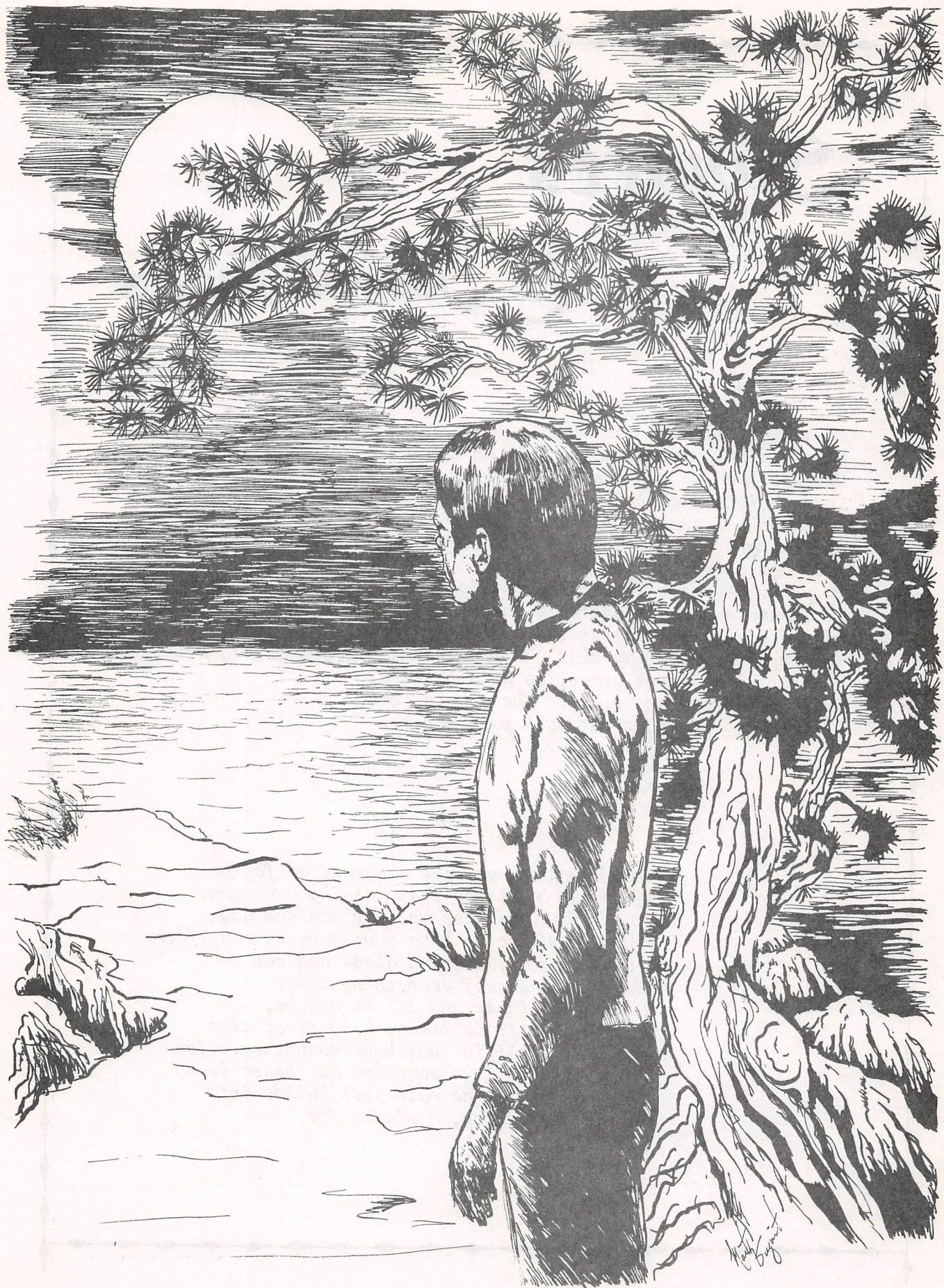
L. Jeanne Powers

I

When night is here and time is still sleeping
When God only watches with half an eye
My eyes open to see the stars weeping
Their bright unearthly tears that never die.
Seeing the stars cry makes me want a friend
But you are not with me and I am alone
With not even a tormentor to end
My pain. My mind enters the twilight zone
Of dreams and death and pain unending. I
Lie, feeling nothing but the stars' soft tears
As they flow under my skin. I wonder why
At night loneliness grows, as do all fears,
At least in men and stars. The sun is free,
Contented. It knows not such pain can be.

II

Loneliness hangs like a shroud of fog on
My trembling limbs that nothing can warm.
No blanket can ease me, nor can the dawn
Which should give hope once more in many forms
But not to me; I stand alone and see
The loneliness of everything alive.
I see loneliness and all it can be,
All it is. It is like a head-first dive
Down sheer cliffs that have no bottom. You
Would like to land sometime but there is no
Merciful end. The pain just builds into
An agony unending, a hidden foe.



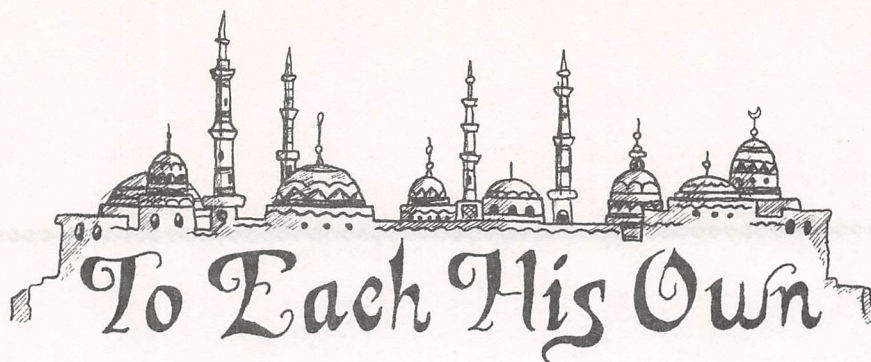
EPILOGUE

Signe Tesson

*Señor, ya me arrancaste lo que yo más quería
Oye otra vez, Dios mío mi corazón clamar.
Tu voluntad se hizo, Señor, contra la mía.
Señor, ya estamos solos mi corazón y el mar.*

--Antonio Machado

A silent figure stood quietly on the hilltop, gazing into the starry night. Somewhere, among the glittering heavens, the spirit of his companion drifts. Duty, honor, and loyalty to comrades in arms had transcended the bond between them, sending the compatriot to the ultimate confrontation. The heart of the one who remained had broken and bled, knowing there was no cure for his pain. Alone under the radiant sky, final vows were made and farewells said; then the lone figure left the hill to return to the realities of life.



To Each His Own

by *mandi schultz*
& *cheryl rice*

*"And the country proverb known,
That every man should take his own,
In your waking shall be shown"*

-Shakespeare - Midsummer Night's Dream

"All hands, this is the Captain. We have established orbit around Argellius II for the purpose of shore leave. Lieutenant Uhura will begin posting leave parties within the hour. As you may recall, we've had some ... problems ... here in the past, but I trust everything will go," he paused, "smoothly this time. Leave parties will begin with crewmen scheduled to go off duty at 1700 hours. Kirk out."

Kirk turned, nodded to Uhura, then settled back in his chair. He wasn't particularly enthusiastic about this shore leave. He was bored -- everyone seemed to be lately -- and he thought they needed an assignment more than they needed more leisure time, but such were the thought processes of the Powers that Be so he acquiesced. *Argellius has lost much of its appeal over the years*, he lamented. The sound of the turbo-lift doors caught his attention and he turned to see Chantal Caberfae approaching him.

"Lieutenant, what brings you to the bridge?"

"Curiosity," she replied simply. "I don't get up here very often." She seemed to sigh. "Security check, Captain. Just wanted to make sure it was still here."

He wished he could avoid the stare from her that was most likely inviting verbal combat of some kind. "Really?"

"Actually, I came to see Penda," she gestured toward the Communications Officer. "I'm going downstairs for awhile and wanted her to know where she could find me if I'm needed."

"Are you expecting to be needed, Lieutenant?"

"I'm ... hoping ... not to be, sir, but it pays to plan ahead. I also wanted to post Security people ..."

"I haven't given orders to ..."

"No, sir, you haven't, but I have. Yemen* has procured a new body of officials, none of which have dealt with this ship before. After reviewing past records they requested shore patrol parties be beamed down along with the leave parties."

* Second planet in the Argellius system.



"Why haven't I been told this?"

"Well, sir, I assume since it is a security matter it was channeled to me directly. In any case, I came to clear it with you before proceeding."

"Nice that someone remembers the Captain of this ship from time to time," he muttered. "Very well, Lieutenant, select the patrol members and co-ordinate them."

"Completed, Captain. If you wish to approve ..."

He shook his head. "No, go ahead and post them. Let's get this shore leave started and get it over with."

Assuming she was dismissed, she turned to approach Lieutenant Uhura.

"Lieutenant," he asked suddenly, "what are you going to do on the surface?"

She looked at him a bit suspiciously. "I have people to see, sir."

"You've been to Yemen before?"

"Yes, sir, hasn't everyone?"

This time it was entrance of Doctor McCoy to the bridge that changed the situation. Smiling, his hands together, he walked toward the Captain's chair, and Chantal took advantage of the situation to hold counsel with Uhura.

"Going down with the first party, Jim?" he asked.

"I don't think so, Bones. I've got desk work to catch up on."

"I've always envied the Captain's prerogative to go with the first party. That way he has the rest of the leave period to recuperate. Really, Jim, you know you need ..."

"No, don't try pulling that on me again. If I hear any more about efficiency ratings" he glanced carefully to Lieutenant Caberfae behind him, "before the solar month is out, I'm going to ..."

"Oh, come on, Jim. I'll buy you a drink. When we were at Starbase IV I was talking to this old friend of mine and he told me about a place that ... well, let me tell you, we can't miss it. How about it?"

Kirk nodded, resignedly. "I give up, I'll go. Now what exactly did your friend say about this place?"

Kirk walked the last hallway to the transporter room, nodding casually to those who acknowledged him as he passed. He'd showered and shaved, changed his clothes and had a cup of coffee, and still couldn't shake the uneasy feeling he had about this shore leave. He told himself it was understandable, that after the trouble they had there in the past he would naturally be anxious about it, but somehow that answer felt entirely too pat, too comforting, and just too easy to settle for. As he came to his destination, he saw McCoy, arms folded, in the doorway.

"Well, you don't look like a man on his way to R&R," the doctor said, still smiling.

Kirk tried to grin, but ended up shaking his head. "I don't know what it is, Bones, but I've got a bad feeling about this. Something is going to happen. I just know it. You know the Council has asked for shore patrol parties while we're here."

"That shouldn't surprise you, should it?"

"I suppose not, but ... oh, it's ... it's probably just nerves. You know we've been sitting on our tails for so long now, I don't know why we've been ordered to take a leave. We need an assignment, not more time to twiddle our thumbs."

"Well, I for one am not complaining. I'm starting to see Sickbay walls in my sleep, so this has to be an improvement. Come on. You know, Gabe Caine said that if you can go to just one place on Yemen, this is the place to go. They've got the most fantastic ..."

Chantal was seated cross-legged on her bunk, a notepad and pencil in hand. Annoyed, she scratched out the remainder of the seemingly innocuous message, reread it for accuracy, and then mentally checked it against the code she had committed to memory. She couldn't understand why Caidan had rerouted the ship to Argellius, and the implications of possibilities were disconcerting. Among other things, she didn't need the aura of mystery; she did her best work out of spotlights. She went to

the closet, selected her clothes, and checked the message one last time before she would give it to Uhura to send. There was something wrong. She didn't like the feelings she was having about this shore leave. She knew she was totally lacking in precognitive powers, but she felt positive something was going to happen, and as the past had often proved, Fate was always kind enough to fulfill her negative anticipations.

Kirk had thus far resisted the urge to tell his friend that he saw nothing unusually appreciable in the den that came so highly recommended. *Le Chat Gris* looked so much like all the other inns he had seen on Yemen, he felt almost disappointed after everything the doctor had said. He tried to tell himself, though, that it might be just as well. He fingered the glass before him and looked around, dismayed to notice that the smoke and incense were starting to give him a headache. Fresh air would not help, for the night's perennial fog would antagonize his sinuses as much as the room's atmosphere had. There wasn't much hope; come dullness or disaster, this was going to be an eminently forgettable shore leave, and he was anxiously awaiting the opportunity to return to the ship and start forgetting it. Until he saw Chantal Caberfae come through the doors.

"Say, there's our lady Security Chief," McCoy said, elbowing him. "Why don't we invite here over for a drink?"

Kirk raised a hand to stay him momentarily as he watched three females leave a table and cluster about the blonde Capellan, whose head of flaxen silver could still be seen towering over theirs. The sound of women's chatter wafted their way as he watched her walk with them to a table.

"Seems she already has company," Kirk said. "She did say she had people to see here."

"I wonder what kind of people her friends are?" McCoy mused. "And how she ever managed to know people like that."

"Oh, I don't know, Bones, they look like ... very friendly people to me." Kirk sipped from his glass, still looking to the other side of the room. Chantal seemed quite happily engrossed in conversation with her ... friends, and completely oblivious to his and the doctor's presence.

"The little one, the petite blonde," McCoy's eyes widened over the rim of his glass as he tried to look nonchalant. "What do you think?"

"No," Kirk shook his head, trying to get into the spirit of the surroundings. "I think the brunette in green. She's very nice and the color of her clothes sets off the red in her hair, don't you think?" Inwardly he wished he could think about Chantal like that. Dammit, he knew he did, what he wished was that he could do something about it.

"You think so, really? No, I like the blonde much better."

Kirk shrugged, forcing a smile. "Definitely the brunette."

"To each his own," McCoy smiled. "I don't know about you but I'm going over there to say hello. Why don't you come with me, Jim?"

He shook his head. "I'm just not very good company tonight, Bones. I'd really rather not. Don't let me stop you, though, go ahead. Somebody ought to enjoy this leave."

McCoy got up and looked at his friend with some concern. "I don't know, Jim. I think that when we get back to the ship, you ought to ..."

Kirk nodded, wishing there was something he could do that would work immediately. He'd known the man too long to not be concerned about this case of nerves that seemed to have lasted much too long. "Wish me luck."

"To each his own," Kirk reiterated. He watched him cross the room and approach the table where he saw Chantal smile and say something, then beckon the Doctor to sit beside her. He wondered when and where the ubiquitous Lieutenant managed to acquire her curious companions, for of all the things she seemed to be capable of being, a Yemenite bar girl wasn't one of them. That was enough to make him order another drink.

Shore leave could've been different, he told himself, *but for ... what?* He liked Chantal, he genuinely liked her, but every time they talked some unnamed atmosphere took over the conversation and he was no closer to knowing her after all these months than he was the day she came aboard. It seemed all too easy to blame her, to say that the elusive Lieutenant Caberfae had persisted in remaining unreachable, but that didn't quite ring true. She was friendly, even warm at times, he thought as he remembered the night they watched the Jenkins Prism reveal its kaleidoscopic rainbows. But when it came to talking to her about anything unrelated to their jobs, something always happened, and all the words he had come very near to practicing just disintegrated into the banal "shop talk" they always ended up exchanging. If only he could break the ice somehow, say something particularly clever or brilliant or even endearing ...

His reverie was disturbed by motion on the other side of the room. Not very surprised, he saw McCoy, his arm around the shoulders of a petite blonde clad in garish silks, walking toward the stairs that led to the rooms above. *At least someone is going to enjoy this leave*, he thought as he ordered another drink.

McCoy awoke, carefully trying to not disturb the sleeping girl next to him. He stretched, somewhat gingerly, noting that though his head ached slightly and his back even more, he felt surprisingly well. He took a deep breath, savoring the scents of incense, musk, and girl's perfume, and exhaled almost luxuriously, turning to look at her. He couldn't see her face, she was turned away from him, the coverlet pulled closely about her shoulders so only her platinum hair could be seen, and she seemed to be sleeping soundly.

It had been nice, he thought, that was really the exact word for it. He liked her, which was always a prerequisite to him, liking the girl. He liked to buy her a drink or two and talk for awhile, about nothing in particular, mostly just to listen to her. If things seemed to be in his favor he asked, agreed to the price, and went with her. This one was in more of a hurry than he fancied, but there was something exceptionally appealing about her even if her enthusiasm surprised him. The younger ones in the trade ordinarily seemed to gravitate toward younger men, no doubt because often enough they had to accomodate older, less attractive ones. But not this one; of the group with Chantal she approached him immediately, smiling and flirting in an almost adolescent way he was surprised he liked.

Cautious not to wake her, he left the bed and began to dress. He hated goodbyes of any ilk, but especially to women, and decided to leave while she was still sleeping. Walking toward the nightstand, he counted out the money he wanted to leave her, decided to double it, and put in on the tabletop.

"Thank you," he began to whisper softly, and suddenly he realized he didn't know her name. Considering how much he enjoyed her services that somehow seemed unforgiveable. He decided to wake her, and if she was the way he remembered her to be, perhaps it wouldn't be goodbye after all.

He drew the blanket down to her shoulders and was mildly startled by the childlike innocence her face held in its sleeping repose, even through the excessive make-up she wore. He immediately regretted his decision to wake her. Women who sold their bodies distressed him, and this was going to bother him, too. *Why would anyone so young ...?* He told himself he was having culturally programmed reactions to the situation but he couldn't help himself. He touched her bare shoulder and shook her gently, then waited ... she didn't stir. He shook her again, more firmly this time, but still she didn't respond. He turned her on her back, still without her becoming conscious, and something snapped in his brain. He immediately checked her pulse and her pupils, trying to ignore the sensation of shock that was creeping through him. Automatically he drew his communicator and signaled the ship.

"Uhura here."

"This is Doctor McCoy. Beam an emergency medical team to my coordinates immediately, and have them bring a resuscitator and a stomach pump. Have you got the coordinates?"

"Yes, Doctor, but ..."

"On the double, Lieutenant. There's been an attempted suicide and ..."

"One of our personnel?"

"No, one of the civilians, but I think the Captain will want us to handle it."

"They're on their way, Doctor."

Belting his communicator, he moved to the bureau and hastily picked through the belongings scattered on top, hoping to find some clue as to what she had taken. He didn't think she had injected the substance, considering her condition. He walked back to the bed and checked her again, revelling in the faint but still present heartbeat. He opened the single drawer of the nightstand, poking through its contents in vain.

A shimmer in the corner of the room announced the arrival of the emergency medical team who, upon integrating, immediately began their work.

"Get her to Sickbay as soon as possible," he told the nurse. "I'm going to stay behind and see if there's any trace of whatever she took. Call the ship and have Geraldo stand by. He's had a lot of experience in this area."

Kirk was in his quarters, reading, one of his least favorite ways of passing time. He tried to comfort himself with the knowledge that they'd already passed one night without a hitch and that if his luck would just hold a little while longer, they'd be on their way again. After all ...

There was a knock on the door which he knew he was obliged to answer even if he was still technically on leave. "Come."

Chantal Caberfae walked into the room, and he knew from the look on her face that he wasn't going to like whatever it was she had to say. *Why is she doing this to me?*

"Captain, there's been some trouble and I thought ..."

He was on his feet immediately. "Why wasn't I called?"

"I am calling you, Captain. It didn't seem wise to put this business through Communications any more than necessary, and I ..."

"What business, Lieutenant?"

"One of our people is involved with an attempted suicide on the surface, sir, and I have three shore patrols out now to ..."

His body sagged and he felt as though the weight of three worlds had just been placed on his shoulders. He raised a hand. "Slowly, Lieutenant. What happened?"

"A local woman in one of the inns has apparently tried to take her life. One of our people was with her at the time."

"Why couldn't she have been stopped?"

"Captain, the matter is rather delicate." Chantal took two steps and paused. "It is one of the girls from the inn, *Le Chat Gris*. She was with the man upstairs. Apparently, she made her attempt while he was sleeping. Doctor McCoy thought it best to have one of our medical teams take care of her, to get the whole situation on board the *Enterprise* and in our hands as soon as possible. I just talked to Doctor Geraldo and apparently she'll be all right. I'm on my way now to talk to the Council. Needless to say they're not happy about this, apparently something violent always seems to happen when ..."

"I know, Lieutenant. We're a one-ship plague. Next week they'll issue a General Order for us to avoid any civilized areas under penalty of death. Where's the man involved?"

"That, sir, is the rest of the problem. He's gone. As I said before, I have three shore patrol parties looking for him now."

"Looking for him?"

"He's disappeared, sir. As soon as Mr. Spock can arrange it we're going to try a computer check of the surface, but he's clearing certain banks and the procedures involved are getting a little complicated since we're trying to arrange an erasable record of this."

"Erasable?"

"Well, sir, I assumed, you would want continued discretion if at all possible and ..."

"Lieutenant," Kirk paused, "I've missed something, or you're talking in circles. Maybe both. Why would I want discretion? What the devil's going on?" He looked at her, almost incredulously. "Lieutenant, just who is the man involved in this?"

"Dr. McCoy, sir. He disappeared while the emergency medical team was in the room working on the girl. One of the orderlies said he was searching the room to see if he could find whatever it was that she had taken, and when they went to beam up, he was gone. I thought that under the circumstances, the Doctor being your friend, you would want this handled as tidily as possible. As it is, sir, you've got to come with me and talk to the Council before they contact our superiors."

"I'll meet you in the transporter room, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir." She shouldered the tricorder she had in her hands and left.

He stood there momentarily, feeling more alone than he had in a long time.

The meeting with the administrators succeeded in several areas, including that of adding to Kirk's confusion. Politicians never ceased to amaze him. Although they were in a properly righteous fury over the incident, they were also willing to come to terms since the young woman in question, one Jory Demuth, was not a native Argellian but rather, according to the identity tape found among her belongings, a native of one of the Esablian planets. Belland, one of the administrators, an imported bureaucrat from Rigel IV, politely yet with an air of superiority, requested a private conference with Security Chief Caberfae and invited Kirk to enjoy lunch in the meanwhile. Nonplussed, Kirk nursed a glass of Argellian brandy for the better part of an hour, awaiting her return.

He knew something was going to go wrong, but if he'd had the vaguest inkling that it was going to concern someone as close to him as McCoy, he would've put his command braid down and at least insisted on another leave port. He was totally incapable of drawing any conclusions. *Why had Miss Demuth decided on that particularly inopportune moment to attempt to take her life? Quite frankly, why couldn't she have gone off somewhere, if she had to do it, and not involve one of his crew? But especially Bones ... Why did she have to involve him, and thereby involve the entire ship, in her private tragedy?* At least he hoped it was private, and hers. He was even more incapable of conceiving the notion that McCoy had somehow created the situation that prompted her to ... *Not McCoy ... He surely didn't know the girl, except for the time they spent together that very evening, and he couldn't possibly have done something to her that would make her want to stop living. He couldn't ... not Bones.* At least he hoped not. *But if he didn't, where in God's name is he? Why did he disappear? Caberfae had questioned all the members of the emergency medical team and he had definitely disappeared sometime before the beam-up, on his own steam, so there wasn't any foul play involved initially. Then where is he, why did he run? Oh, he is capable of flying off the handle about things, but something like this ... he just doesn't lose his bearings.* It didn't make any sense at all. Not anymore than Belland's wanting to talk to Chantal privately did. He paused, hearing footsteps fall softly on the carpeted floor.

"I think we're safe for awhile," Chantal said, smoothly taking the seat opposite him.

"You and Mr. Belland have a nice chat?" he asked somewhat sarcastically.

She refused to be baited. "Since the woman is not a native, the Council is willing to be considerably more lenient about all this than if she were. I persuaded Mr. Belland to allow us to continue the shore leave here. I assumed you would prefer that, and if you've not considered it, I would appreciate it if you would. It will be much easier for me to do my job if the rest of the crew is preoccupied."

He looked at her with mild incredulity. Somehow she had a way of saying incredible things in a perfectly natural manner. "A woman tries to kill herself in McCoy's bed, he disappears, and you think we should go right on with the mirth, merriment, and flower-picking?"

"Exactly."

"May I ask why?"

"Logically, Captain, nothing has really happened to us. The woman isn't one of our people, and her attempt was on her own life, not McCoy's. Lastly, he's technically still on leave, being a senior officer. To curtail leave and hold everyone aboard ship is going to look like a mute admission of guilt. What will you put in your log? It's my hope that we can locate McCoy soon and eventually straighten this out. So it is my suggestion to proceed, more or less, as though this hadn't happened."

"Lieutenant, has anyone ever told you you're incredible?"

She nodded, "About ten minutes ago."

"Belland?"

She nodded again.

"Lieutenant, do you know him?"

"Yes, we ... we worked together some time ago when he was still on Rigel. He can be very reasonable when it's to his advantage. I merely pointed out that since this woman is not of Yemen, but is a Federation citizen, he should put the situation totally in our hands. Believe me, he was more than glad to be rid of it. He's new here, after all, and doesn't need something like this on his records either. You know what kind of people these are, any act of violence like this stands out like a ..." she groped for the cliché. "a ... green? ... thumb?"

Kirk shrugged, with the hint of a grin.

"So when I suggested we handle it, he was delighted, and most grateful."

"I suppose I should thank you."

"Not yet. I still have to find McCoy."

"I thought you said he'd come back."

"No, I merely stated that his shore leave wasn't over yet so there is no reason to report him AWOL. While it would be infinitely preferable for him to return under his own powers, I think it rather doubtful. I will join the second shore patrol team and search for him."

"I know I'm only the Captain, but is there anything I can do?"

She sailed right over the sarcasm. "Yes, sir, you can help me question the girl. I just talked to



Dr. Geraldo and he says that she is recovering as she should and will be able to be interrogated shortly."

"What do you make of all this, Lieutenant?"

She shook her head. "I'm not sure. I knew this was going to happen ... I mean I knew something was going to happen, I could feel it."

"I thought you told me you have no psi power."

"I don't. But I learned a long time ago to trust my notions about things."

"As a rule, so do I, but Fleet Operations would have taken a dim view of my telling them the Security Chief and I are having notions about this place." His feeble attempt at humor told him he must be thinking a little more clearly: the depression was lifting. "Have you any other notions, Lieutenant? I mean, just between the two of us?"

"You won't like it."

"Try me."

"It's going to get worse before it gets better."

He wondered when he could be close enough to her to tell her that was the way it always was.

"Sir, I wish you all the luck in the world, but she's adamant. She won't talk to anyone but McCoy."

Chantal was pacing again, and that disturbed him as much as her standing still and looming over him as he sat did. "Have a seat, Lieutenant. Now tell me what happened?"

"Well, first of all, she's coming along quite nicely. Geraldo said he could release her from Sickbay tomorrow under normal circumstances. I explained to her that I -- we -- didn't require infinite detail, but merely an outline of what happened, and if McCoy were involved in any way. I ... I also had to explain to her, sir, that if he ... if he did anything to her that prompted this that she must feel free to tell us so that the proper steps can be taken."

"For godssake, Chantal, Bones would never hurt a woman. He isn't capable of anything like that." He tried to be patient with her, for he knew she didn't know McCoy personally, but the inference that he could've committed some atrocity upon the girl that was enough for her to try to take her life was becoming more lucid all the time.

"I think, sir, that no man can say what he is capable of until after the deed."

"Lieutenant, do you think McCoy did something to her?"

She shook her head, then casually brushed a strand of shimmering hair behind her left ear. "No, I personally don't think so. I have reviewed his profiles, those the computer would give me access to. Not that what they said would have been totality enough for me to base such an opinion. Geraldo's medical reports have backed up my summation, though. She hasn't been harmed in any way, there is no evidence of any violence beyond ..." She stopped abruptly.

"Violence beyond what, Lieutenant?"

She sighed obviously. "Dr. Geraldo's medical report states that she does show evidence of having partaken in lengthy and somewhat ... vigorous ... sexual intercourse. Since all the ... signs ... are recent, we have to assume they were perpetrated by McCoy."

Kirk shrugged, feeling uncomfortable before this ice blonde who was yet a stranger to him as well as everyone else on board and sitting there arbitrarily discussing his friend's sexual proclivities. It must have been longer since their last leave than he remembered. He did remember ... the leave they were going to have on Babel until they went off to chase Spock's nova-that-wasn't*. The time they went to Babel to pick up their new female Security Chief.

"But considering her occupation," Chantal continued, breaking the uneasy silence, "That was certainly not enough, in my estimation, to cause her to try to kill herself."

"I'm open to suggestions, Lieutenant."

"None, sir, except to find McCoy. She refuses to talk to anyone but him, I tried, even Spock tried."

"Spock?"

* DGR #1, What Memories Can Bring--TOSOP #2

"Yes, it seems he was there before I was."

"What about the computer scan of the surface?" Kirk remembered suddenly.

"I ... I didn't want to say anything about that," she began reluctantly. "Mr. Spock is waiting for your direct order."

"My order? Surely he knows ..."

"That doesn't seem to be the problem, sir. I'm not certain how to put this, but he seems extremely reluctant to do it."

"Reluctant? That's not like Spock. What did he say?"

"Only that he thought McCoy would return in due course, whatever that means. Miss Demuth isn't the only one who's not talking. With your permission, sir, I can conduct the scan myself."

"I think you'd better, Lieutenant. I'll talk to Spock."

Chantal rose and walked to door. Kirk thought he saw her look somewhat wistfully at the Jenkers Prism encased on the counter behind him.

"Is there anything else, Lieutenant?"

"I don't know if it's important, but I think changes, however small, in situations, should at least be noted for future reference."

"Go on."

"It's Miss Demuth. She's ... she's different now."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean that the medical team brought aboard a blonde Yemenite tavern woman with excessive make-up, and the woman I talked to in Sickbay is a freshly scrubbed, freckle-faced red-head. Christine said the wig was a very expensive hairpiece."

"Any notions, Lieutenant?"

"Women in her profession often affect different appearances, it shouldn't be anything unusual."

"Chantal," he began suddenly, "you were in that inn last night, you were sitting with her and two other ... ladies."

"Yes, Captain?"

"Do you know her?"

"Why, no. I would have said so if I did."

"What about the other two?"

"Are they involved in this, Captain?"

"Answer the question, Lieutenant."

"They are ... old acquaintances, sir. I knew them some years back."

"Do they know her?"

"Only recently, sir. They're employed at the same place."

"That inn," Kirk assumed.

"No, sir."

"Then what were they doing there?"

"Really, sir, I don't think this has any bearing ..."

"Dammit, Lieutenant, I have to know anything that might give us a lead on this." He was losing his patience for a variety of reasons, including her hesitancy in telling him that she knew them.

"The three of them are employed at the Dragon Chateau, sir."

He remembered hearing the name, but he had never been there. The Chateau was the most exclusive gaming and pleasure house on Yemen, its services available only to those who could afford to be entertained exceptionally well, and that didn't include Starfleet officers.

"Then wasn't being at *Le Chat Gris* a ... a conflict of interests."

"Perhaps, but they were on their own time there."

"Have you questioned the other women?"

"I saw no reason to, sir, after speaking with them last night. There was no more information they could give me."

"What did you learn last night?" *Why, he wondered, is she forcing me to drag every bit of this from her syllable by syllable.*

"They introduced me to Miss Demuth last night and in the course of the conversation I learned that she has only been employed at the Chateau for a brief period of time. They would know very little of her, sir, it's not a business one forms close associations in. The sisterhood of the streets is largely a myth."

"How is it you know these women, Lieutenant?"

"I had occasion to work with them some time ago, on a security matter. The details are classified, sir. Only Commodore Caidan can give you further information. Now, if I'm dismissed ..."

He nodded, foiled again, and watched her leave. She was correct, things were getting worse, and in more ways than he had anticipated.

He didn't know how long he had slept -- indeed, he was surprised to discover he slept at all. When McCoy hadn't returned on schedule, Lieutenant Caberfae asked him if he wanted her to proceed with the computer surface scan, and something inside him said no. He knew hope was a luxury he wasn't often allowed, but it seemed to be all there was left. Twelve hours later, McCoy had still failed to return. He had to log it, as much as it hurt him to do it to his friend. Now time was indeed of the essence and he decided to rouse Chantal from her sleep -- and she was cool and reserved enough to be sleeping through it all -- and tell her to go ahead. The inactivity, the not knowing, was as galling as the problem. He was reaching for the intercom when he heard someone at his door. A visitor in the middle of the night was ... The knock came again.

"Come."

The door muffled open and closed as Chantal Caberfae stepped in. Out of uniform, she pushed the hood of her cloak off her head and tried to look casual. Kirk left the bed, suddenly realizing that he didn't remember if he was dressed. Relieved to notice his rumpled uniform, he walked toward his desk.

"Making evening rounds, Lieutenant? Another security check to see if we're all here?"

"I've been on the surface, sir, with one of the shore patrol parties."

"Have they found him?"

"No, sir, they have not. I have, however, spoken again with my friends. I have located the doctor, and I need your help."

Kirk passed a hand over his eyes in hopes of pushing the drowsiness aside and reached for a cup on his desk. The bite of the cold coffee achieved the necessary effect. "Thank God, Chantal. Where is he? Did you bring him back?"

"No, sir, and that's why I need your help. He's in the Dragon Chateau. I did not think it wise that I send in a patrol party for him, particularly if he resisted. We don't need another incident and there would surely be one. The Chateau is very protective about their patrons. I would have gone myself, but I am not sufficiently acquainted with the Doctor to have any persuasive powers over him. I had hoped that you would go ..." Her voice broke off as she seemed to be staring intently at him.

"Of course I will, immediately. Will you accompany me?"

"Unless it is an order, sir, I think not. It would be better for you to go to him alone."

"You're probably right."

"They have a beaming point, sir. I can operate the transporter if you wish."

That announcement surprised him but only fleetingly. "Let's go then, Lieutenant."

"Sir, I would suggest you not appear there in uniform."

"Afraid we'll give the company a bad name, Lieutenant? You're the most security-minded Security Chief the *Enterprise* ever had." He forced a smile.

"I'm paid to do a job, Captain, and I do it very well. I'll meet you in the transporter room in ten minutes."

"Make it five, Lieutenant," he said as she left the room.

He found her behind the transporter controls, awaiting his arrival. The cloak discarded, he saw she was wearing a black dress, ankle length, with long fitted sleeves and a neckline that was discreet by about three millimeters. The stark hue made her complexion look creamy and warm. Stunning ... that was the word, he told himself, even though she still had her apparently long hair pinned up primly as Lieutenant Caberfae always did on duty. She was the most striking woman he had seen in a time and he wished he could tell her, but somehow he had the distinct impression she'd laugh.

"The coordinates are locked in, Captain," she said. "You'll materialize in a lobby of sorts. An attendant will meet you, and while they check your identity tape you'll be subjected to two different types of x-ray examinations as you walk through a partition. They are harmless and part of the Chateau security system. The attendant will inquire as to your interests so you can be directed to the proper area. McCoy is in a bar referred to as The Temple."

Kirk stepped onto the transporter pad and regarded her doubtfully. "Are you sure you can do this?"

He thought he heard her sigh. "Yes, Captain. I will wait here for your signal to beam you and the Doctor back. By locking on to your communicator coordinates," she added in hopes of assuring him.

There was a slight pause, then he stepped down and walked over close to her, facing the Capellan across the control console. "Tell me, Lieutenant -- in confidence -- is there anything you can't do?"

She wasn't sure, not knowing him well enough, if he were joking or not. "Oh ... well, sir ..." For a moment she was uncharacteristically at a loss for words, but she was in a fever of impatience for him to get on with the task of finding McCoy so she told him what she assumed he wished to hear. "Sir, I can only assure you that my training for starship service has been most thorough."

"Oh, well, in that case ..." he grinned and strode back to his place on the transporter. Before she could work the levers he broke in again. "One favor, Lieutenant. If you ever decide to take over the ship, you will tell me a little in advance?"

"Of course, sir," she answered coolly, and the words rang in his ears as he began to dematerialize. "You'll be the very first to know." This time he had to worry about her sense of humor.

He was gone, and she adjusted the intramural lighting to its lowest level. She wrapped herself in her cloak and sat on the transporter deck. She removed the clasps from her hair and shook her head, feeling her tresses fall and frame her face. Now the vigil would begin. "I wish you luck. James Kirk, I wish all of us luck. For all the good it will probably do."

Kirk integrated, a millilifetime later, in a small but opulently decorated foyer. A definitely Oriental-looking woman, arrayed in clothes and jewelry he estimated would have cost him a year's pay, greeted him, and the universal translator installed in the room echoed in Terran her welcoming him to the Dragon Chateau.

Wish me luck, Chantal, he thought to himself as he stepped from his place. *Or pray. Or whatever it is you do when all else fails.*

He was oblivious to the smoke and din the bar embraced him with, his mind being only on finding McCoy, though he did allow himself to notice that the guests -- customers -- in this particular room seemed less elite somehow than he expected. Where was McCoy, could he have left before he even arrived? Why not, considering the way things were going ... He sighed heavily and began to scan the room table by table. The Temple, Chantal called it -- he decided not to try to guess why; the carved wood and ornate brass that dominated the decor didn't impress him. A blue haze obscured the ceiling, he noted, and wondered momentarily if whatever was in the air would affect him. Nearly every table was occupied and the bar was full, but he elbowed his way in at the end and ordered a whiskey, neat, hoping to look less conspicuous as he walked away.

After much time spent elbowing his way through crowds and excusing himself to those he bumped into, he stopped with relief. Just as he had dared not hope, there was McCoy, seated at a small table quite in the center of the room. He held his breath, hoping the other man wouldn't see him and run before he could reach him.

"Bones," he said quickly, putting his hand on the doctor's shoulder.

He thought McCoy would be startled. Instead, he merely looked up, his eyes widening momentarily in recognition, then poured another drink into the glass he held in his hand.

"I wondered how long it would take your pretty Security Chief to find me," he said emptily.

Kirk drew up the empty chair and sat. "Bones ..." He didn't want to stammer but he knew it was hopeless. "Bones ... come back with me. Everyone is worried about you."

"The girl ..." McCoy swallowed the drink almost convulsively and poured another.

"She's fine, Bones, really."

McCoy shut his eyes and grimaced in what Kirk thought looked like the most blatant anguish he'd ever seen.

"Bones ... if you want to talk ... So many times you've listened to our troubles. Let someone listen to yours." His mind was pleading more than his heart. I have to know, he thought.

Slowly, mutely, he shook his head. Kirk thought he saw tears filling the bloodshot eyes. Noticing his eyes made him search the rest of the face. Bearded stubble, dark smudges under his eyes, the jaw alternately tight then trembling. His shoulders sagged and his hand shook as he held the glass. Whatever happened that night with Jory Demuth, the memory was eating this man alive.

"She was so beautiful," McCoy murmured, "so young ..."

"She's all right, Bones, she's in Sickbay right now." He was saddened to see McCoy reach for the near-empty decanter on the table and wondered what he could say to stop him. "In fact, she wants to see you."

The glass fell from McCoy's hand and his body shuddered. "Oh dear God" escaped from his lips.

Kirk bypassed the luxury of wondering what he said wrong. "Bones, what happened? You can tell me ... whatever it is ..." His hand rested firmly on the man's arm.

Slowly McCoy again shook his head. "Not now, Jim. I can't. Not now."

"All right, but at least come back to the ship. We can talk later, whenever you like, just come back with me." Kirk knew he had to bring him back, he couldn't chance his disappearing again. The man's condition frankly frightened him. Though he may have been drinking a long while, Kirk could see he was sober and that the anguish was coming from within.

McCoy nodded in agreement and Kirk helped him to his feet. One hand on the doctor's arm, he led him through the bar and to the beam point where he could contact Chantal.

"Coming home" lifted Kirk's spirits somewhat as he stepped from the transporter platform. He still had his problems, but at least they were corralled aboard the *Enterprise*. Chantal Caberfae, calmly stifling a yawn, moved from behind the transporter console to face him.

"You're still here, Lieutenant?"

"Of course, sir, I said I would be. I've had the area cleared for a security drill so no one will be in the halls." Her eyes shifted lightly to McCoy, who didn't seem to notice, then back to Kirk. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Not right now, Lieutenant. Go to bed. It's been a long night. I'll call you ..."

"I'm on duty in 3½ minutes, sir," she sighed with a smile.

"You're relieved," he said, "or do Security Chiefs like Captains never sleep?"

"We do nap occasionally, sir."

He went to the door, McCoy stepping into the corridor first, then turned to Chantal. She was carefully draping her mantle over her arm, and for the first time he noticed that her hair was unpinned. He told himself it was absurd to even note it at a time like this but he couldn't help himself. Her head inclined as she carefully folded the garment, her hair became a shimmering cloud falling to one



side of her face and with a hint of a wave hanging past her waist. She reminded him of a Chamoun* painting, only Chantal was clothed.

"Sir?" She caught him staring.

"I'm ... I'm taking the Doctor to his cabin."

"Sir," she continued -- had she smiled? -- "He told you?"

He shook his head. "Nothing, Lieutenant." Then he passed through the doorway as it slid closed behind him.

Chantal lowered the lighting in the transporter room and paused by the door. "That's what I feared, James Kirk. It is getting worse."

The turbolift hum, like all the sounds inherent in the ship, made him feel better even now with the nameless gloom he experienced. Lady *Enterprise* surrounding him with her metal and polymer embrace. *If we have to, we can do anything*, he told himself. *Well, almost ...* As the doors zipped open at the bridge, he put from his mind the fact that he'd had only three hours of uneasy sleep and stepped forward. But no one noticed. All eyes were at least casually riveted on Spock's station. When he added his, he could see Chantal Caberfae. He didn't know what was taking place but the picture she and the Vulcan presented was something he felt compelled to ponder.

They were facing each other so he saw them in profile, halfbreeds both, the woman as tall as the man. The Vulcan, arms folded, revealed no clue in his masklike face. The Capellan, one hand on her hip and the other raised in a punctuating gesture, had just the slightest trace of color accenting the exasperation in her face. They were day and night to each other, the woman in her glowing crown of hair and red uniform, the man dark in blue. They were day and night to Kirk, too, yet the same somehow. Both thoroughly efficient professionals, both immensely determined people ... both halfbreeds, belonging nowhere as much as they belonged right where they were. At least that was true of Spock, in his own way he had said as much. But Chantal was another matter. She belonged, but Kirk felt she was the sort who belonged wherever she chose to be and it was merely fortune that put her aboard.

"Captain?" Lieutenant Uhura's voice broke his reverie.

"Lieutenant, what's ... " he gestured at Spock and Chantal.

"Welcome to the Starfleet Debating Society," Uhura said, apparently amused. "They've been at it nearly an hour. The inside word is to put your money on the red."

He looked at Uhura, with some amazement. "No, I think it'll be a draw, Lieutenant."

Chantal saw him first and turned to face him. He was a bit surprised to see how well she looked considering that she couldn't have had any more rest than he had. Her eyes shone like green ice and he was glad it was Spock and not himself who had apparently challenged them.

"I thought I excused you from duty, Lieutenant," he began.

"True, sir, but with so much work for me left undone, I thought the better of it."

Kirk saw that they were still the center of attention on the bridge. "If you have something to report, Lieutenant, I suggest we take it up in the briefing room."

"I'd like Mr. Spock to accompany us," she said firmly.

"Very well. Mr. Spock, you'll come with us. Lieutenant Uhura, you have the com."

Leading the parade out, Kirk sighed, relieved to feel some control over the situation. At least they could discuss it behind closed doors.

Chantal sat, trying to look as demure as her stature would allow because she knew Kirk would be impressed by the visuals. Inside, she felt so furious she wanted to smash something. *That damned Vulcan ...* she tried to tell herself she was experiencing undue paranoia but she was positive he was being obstinate just to spite her. He didn't like her, not since the day she came aboard. Entirely too much time had passed and she was no closer to finding the answers she needed even with McCoy found, and now she was left at the Vulcan's mercy. She needed him and had no way to force him. She didn't have time to play a power struggle with him, Caidan's message that morning was explicit, at least to her, the only person aboard who could decode it.

* Chamoun, Yousuf: a 21st century neorenaissance painter whose works primarily featured nude blonde women.

"So, you see, sir," she said, forcing herself to moderate her tone, "when you told me that you were unable to elicit the necessary information from Doctor McCoy, it seemed the only possible way is to have Mr. Spock mind meld with ... well, with either the Doctor or Miss Demuth. Initially I would've preferred the Doctor; his profile being familiar to me, the results would have had the higher probability of accuracy. However, considering the state he has returned in, I would now prefer the girl. She will not talk so I can see no other way of getting the information from her." Actually, Chantal mused to herself, she had several ways, but she doubted the Captain would approve of any of them. "The mind meld is ideal; Mr. Spock is the perfect device," she added enthusiastically.

Kirk cleared his throat. "Well, he isn't really a device, Lieutenant. It's not as though we flip a switch and he works. The meld is a very serious procedure. But I see your point, it does look like our only alternative. Mr. Spock, since it's your mind we want to use ..." He encouraged him to speak.

"Captain, I disagree with the Lieutenant's reasoning. There's no reason to believe that Dr. McCoy will be unable to furnish us with valid information in due course. I can see no purpose ..."

"Captain," Chantal interrupted, "we don't have due course. There's no way of deducing when McCoy will be able, let alone willing, to talk about what happened. We have reports to make, logs to complete, and a new assignment after this leave. Now unless Miss Demuth becomes a passenger indefinitely ..."

"Easy, Lieutenant," Kirk said, wishing there was some way he could avoid being in the middle of their debate. "Spock, what's the problem?"

"Among other things, we would be violating Miss Demuth's civil liberties by forcing her into a mind meld."

"Captain," Chantal decided to direct whatever she had to say to Kirk; she felt the Vulcan was trying to bait her. "Under the circumstances, considering Miss Demuth's state of mind, which cannot be stable if she attempted to take her own life, we are allowed to act in her best interest even if she disagrees."

"Spock?" He turned to the Vulcan again.

"In that the Lieutenant is correct, sir."

"Then I think we'd better do it, don't you, Spock?"

"If that is an order, Captain."

"Spock ... I'm sorry, but we have to take the quickest route open. We have to have some answers, and soon."

Chantal paced outside the doors to Sickbay, unconscious of those who passed her. Spock had been inside with the Demuth girl for over an hour and she had no idea what was happening. At his insistence -- just to spite her, she was sure -- only Dr. Geraldo was permitted to be present. Time was slipping through her fingers, like sand at the Delphia shore, and the answers were not coming. She had her hunches, but this time they wouldn't make an acceptable report to her superiors. Working with regulars, even military regulars, was stifling. An injection of Penathol IV would have made the girl extremely talkative, but it was out of the question since it was illegal outside asylums. She had to tie the matter up before the leave was over, for then they would be headed back to Babel for what ostensible purpose she didn't know, but Caidan would arrange some pretext so he could talk to her -- and she had to have the answers then.

She wondered what the girl would tell Spock, or more precisely, what he would see in her mind. More than that, she disliked Spock's participation in what was her job. She considered vaguely that she could try to discredit him somehow, but that would merely cause difficulties for herself. The coup would be his and it galled her. For reasons that seemed nonexistent, she decided to try to talk to McCoy herself and started for his cabin. He wouldn't talk to Kirk, he wouldn't tell his supposed best friend what happened, but perhaps he would tell a stranger who shared nothing with him on which to base an emotional reaction. She cared, in truth, very little about whatever he did to the girl; the male of any species was often wont to act without reason. And McCoy seemed extremely typical of the average human male.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Doctor," she began. Since he knew it was her and let her enter, she felt somewhat more confident. The door slid shut behind her as she folded her arms across her chest. "I'm aware that you have been unwell. However as Chief of Security there is information I need for my log that I do wish you would supply."

McCoy was seated at his desk and Chantal took the fact that he appeared to have shaved recently as a sign of improvement of his condition. The look on his face, however, didn't give her much more hope. The man she saw was broken and she knew that what she had to do was likely to add to it.

"I don't need very much," she continued, hoping she didn't sound as though she were pleading. "Actually, it's in the line of corroborative testimony. Mr. Spock is interrogating Miss Demuth now ..."

McCoy cocked an eyebrow, and Chantal thought she saw him shudder. "Mr. Spock is what?"

"Perhaps interrogating is too strong a word. I'm sure the Captain has told you that she refuses to talk to any of us. Because of this it's been decided to have Spock perform a ... a mind meld on her to gather the information we need."

She watched McCoy turn pale and wondered why it saddened her.

"Stop him," he said suddenly.

Her flagging spirits rallied; it was the first emotion he'd displayed in some time. Perhaps, as she suspected, he really didn't like Spock.

McCoy moved from where he sat and came toward her. She didn't know him and she couldn't discern the reason behind the abject misery on his face. "For the love of God, *stop him*." He grabbed her roughly by the arms for just a moment, then let go.

She didn't understand why he felt so obviously protective toward the girl. "I cannot. It was my idea."

"You don't understand ... Chantal. Please, he can't be the one ..."

"No, Doctor, I *don't* understand. Perhaps you can tell me. Why do you care," she could no longer resist asking him, "what happens to a prostitute who tried to kill herself in your bed?"

He walked back to the desk and resting his hands on it, seemed to lean for support. He looked at Chantal for what seemed like a very long time and tears welled in his eyes. "Because she's my daughter," he said, choking on the words. "She's my Joanna."

Chantal realized that whatever she said now would determine whether or not he would continue, and her curiosity was peaked beyond the point where she needed the information for her job. She crossed the room and solicitously put her arm about his shoulders as she helped him sit down.

"I didn't know it was her, I swear I didn't. I know how ridiculous that sounds, but I didn't. I haven't seen her in years, she lived with her mother after the divorce, then she went to nursing school. The last I heard was that she was assigned to work on Cygnet IX and I haven't heard anything since then. I didn't know it was her." The words were flowing freely, like a fountain from a pool. "Jim and I were in a tavern, you were there, you were with her. Did you know her?" He didn't wait for an answer. "We were drinking ... I won't say I was drunk, I wasn't. I saw her with you and your friends across the room and I liked the way she looked, that's why I came to your table. I don't know what attracted me to her, she was as garish and gaudy as the other ones, but she was so young. You saw her, she flattered me outrageously. What man wouldn't have been attracted to a pretty little blonde who came on to him?"

"So you went upstairs with her," she said quietly.

McCoy sighed. "Dear lord, yes, I went, the more we talked the more I wanted her. She was so small and soft and warm ..." He looked up suddenly to see the woman he was talking to. Chantal willed herself to look sympathetic. "I didn't know it was her. In the morning I tried to wake her up but she was unconscious. I just couldn't understand why she did it. I hadn't harmed her in any way, not really."

"When did you realize ..."

"I was looking through her things to see if I could find what she had taken. I found this." He reached inside the desk then handed to her a piece of jewelry. It was a necklace, a small locket, inscribed on one side with "Happy birthday, Kitten -- Love, Daddy." Chantal fingered it lightly and returned it to him; he clenched his hand around it.

"It's Joanna's, I gave it to her years ago. When I looked at her again I knew ... the wig, the cosmetics, they didn't make a difference anymore, I knew it was Joanna, and that was why I was attracted to her. Dear god ..." McCoy suddenly covered his head with his hands and Chantal knew he was crying.

Chantal pondered this, unable to shake the feeling that the story was falling into place entirely too patly ... something was wrong, but what?

She cleared her throat. "Something isn't quite right," she mused aloud.

McCoy looked at her with amazement. "You have a talent for understatement, Lieutenant."

She shook her head. "No, you don't understand. Your daughter is supposed to be a nurse in one of the Cygnet colonies. What is she doing lightyears away on Yemen? How does she miraculously manage to be in the same tavern you're in? The coincidences, Doctor, are quite incredible."

"You sound just like Spock," he said distastefully, then remembered what she said. "Now do you see why you have to stop him? I don't want him to know. I don't want anyone to know."

"He may already know, Doctor. He's been with her for more than an hour."

He closed his eyes momentarily. "What am I going to do?"

"More succinctly, Doctor, what am I going to do? Does your daughter like you, Doctor?" she asked suddenly.

He hoped she wasn't being facetious. "She doesn't have much reason to. When I lived with her and her mother I wasn't a very likable man. I had a private practice then and I was Chief of Staff at ... well, at a very prestigious hospital. My career and the money I was making were very important. My own family didn't have much money, I worked my tail off to get through school. Finally when the good opportunities came my way I took advantage of them no matter what the cost. I used my family for window dressing, you might say, they were all a part of my image. Finally, Arianna -- my wife -- decided I wasn't worth the unhappiness it caused her. She divorced me and took Joanna. For several years I did my duty, sent them presents, supported them in style. Arianna died of Sanders Syndrome before there was a cure ... dear god, and there was, only the next year. She died alone, Joanna was at a very fine finishing school I insisted she go to and I was too damned busy, and I thought the treatments would hold her since the breakthrough was so close. After that Joanna went on to the university and the specialized training in her field. We write, once in a great while. I've wanted to make things up to her somehow, honestly I have, but I just didn't know where to start. It's so easy to put things like that off, saying you're waiting for the opportunity." He shook his head. "She has no great reason to be overly fond of me."

"But does she have reason enough to ... to set you up like this. to embarrass you, perhaps ruin your career?"

"It's not easy to think she could be so vindictive."

"It's almost a moot point, there's no real way to say what a person is capable of until they've performed the deed." Chantal decided that was her favorite homily.

"What are you going to do?"

"For now, go to Sickbay and talk to Spock. You realize that until now Miss Demuth ... Joanna ... insisted she would talk to no one but you. Will you see her?"

"Dear god, Chantal, how can I face her?"

She looked puzzled.

"Chantal, I've ... I've been to bed with my own daughter. Don't you understand any of this? I ... I can't face her after what I ... what we ... did."

"You must tell the Captain. I shall tell him you wish to see him privately when he's off duty."

McCoy shook his head.

"You must, Doctor. I have to get to the core of this and I may need his permission to do what I have to do. He'll not grant it without knowing what has happened."

"I know you're right, but I don't know how I will."

Chantal walked to the door which surprised her by zopping open before she triggered the electric eye on it. James Kirk faced her, obviously totally surprised to see her.

"I was just leaving, sir. The Doctor has something to tell you."

"That's impossible," she said emphatically. She knew that under some circumstances it wasn't, but in this case it should have been.

"Nevertheless, Lieutenant, it is. There is no way even a more advanced telepath than myself can penetrate to the subconsciousness with her. Someone, I am quite certain, has placed a barrier there."

"And you can't remove it, bypass it? You'll forgive me, Mr. Spock, telepathy is not my forte and I'm unable to speak in all the proper clinical terms."

"Without knowing precisely how the barrier was erected there is no way to circumnavigate it, let alone remove it. Whatever you wish to know, Lieutenant," he concluded, "you will not learn from Miss Demuth."

Chantal performed her version of counting to ten before answering him, wishing she could tell him that she already knew most of what she needed from McCoy. "That remains to be seen, I think," she said finally. "Is she awake now?"

"She is."

"Then it must be my turn."

The girl was sitting up in bed, sipping liquid from a glass, when Chantal entered the Sickbay ward. Realizing her presence was unnoticed, she paused to study her. The person she met in the tavern that night no longer existed and was replaced by ... Joanna. Her age was indiscernable but Chantal placed it somewhere in the mid-twenties. Rich auburn hair hung heavily to her shoulders and her features were very finely chiseled. Suddenly, she turned to see the Capellan.

"I'd like to speak with you," Chantal said, knowing she'd like to do something a bit more aggressive.

"I've told everyone before, I won't talk to anyone until I can see Dr. McCoy. And if that damned Vulcan tries poking around in my mind once more I'll ... I'll ..." she paused, not knowing quite what to threaten. "I want to see Dr. McCoy," she affirmed.

"I'm sorry, the Doctor has been ... unwell. He's asked me ..."

"If he's well enough to talk to you, he's well enough to talk to me. Now get out of here and tell him ..."

Chantal walked across the room to the side of the bed, casually ascertaining that they were alone. "Miss McCoy, your father has asked me ..."

"You know?" she blurted.

Chantal nodded. "Of course. I'm Chief of Security aboard this ship. It helps a great deal to know what's happening. And it would help me a great deal if you'd talk to me." She sighed inwardly, hoping she could control her exasperation long enough to coerce the girl into filling in the rather large gaps in McCoy's tale.

"Why won't Daddy come to see me?"

"As I said, he's been unwell. He will see you as soon as he is able."

"Is he terribly angry?"

"Should he be?"

"They tell me I tried to take my life, although I can't remember doing so. Daddy's a doctor, he has a great respect for life. And other things."

"Why wouldn't you tell us who you are?"

"I ... I didn't want anything that's happened to reflect on him."

Chantal noted the irony in her statement and tabled it for the time being. "Do you know what has happened?"

"I ... I don't ... Please let me see him."

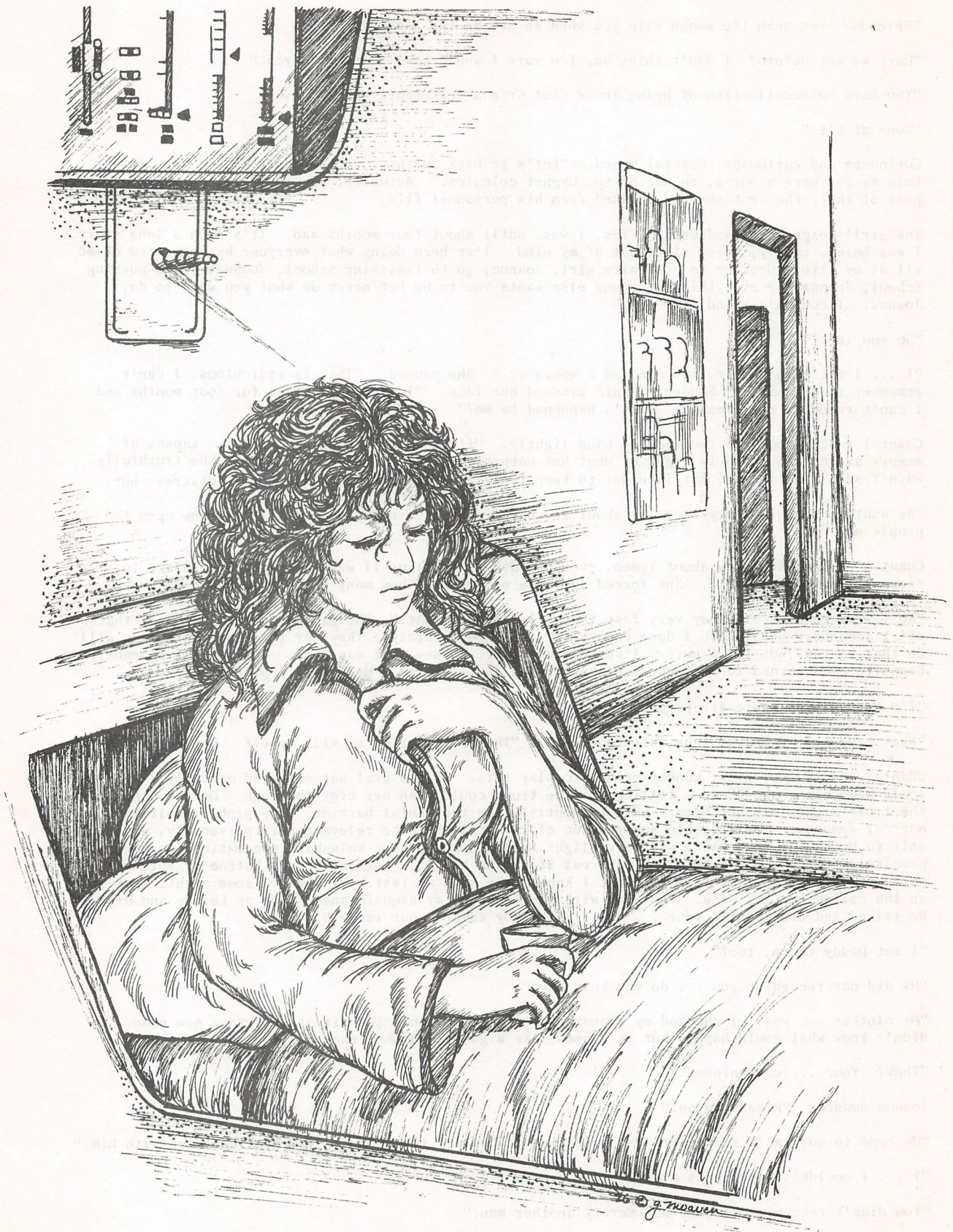
"Miss McCoy ... Joanna ... I give you my word, when he is able, he'll see you. But you must talk to me, or to Mr. Spock, or even the Captain. There are questions that have to be answered, for your father's sake." Chantal did her best to look as imploring and entreating as possible.

"He ... he sent you."

The Capellan nodded, knowing she could talk her way out of it later if she had to.

"Very well, and I'd rather talk to a woman than to one of those men. Please ..." she patted the side of the bed, "sit down. I don't mean to be offensive but tall people make me very nervous."

Chantal obliged. "It's quite all right, many people react that way."



"I ... I really don't know what happened. I was on Yemen with friends and ... and the next thing I remember is waking up here."

"Friends? You mean the women with you when we met in the tavern?"

"Have we met before? I don't think so, I'm sure I would have remembered you."

"You have no recollection of being in *Le Chat Gris* a few nights back?"

"None at all."

Curiouser and curiouser, Chantal mused. "Let's go back further, if you don't mind. Your father told me you were a nurse, on one of the Cygnet colonies." Actually, she recalled, he only told her part of that, the rest she had gleaned from his personnel file.

The girl's expression saddened. "Yes, I was, until about four months ago. It's such a long story. I was bored, really, bored right out of my mind. I've been doing what everyone has expected of me all of my life. Grow up to be a nice girl, Joanna; go to finishing school, Joanna; go to nursing school, Joanna; be everything everyone else wants you to be but never do what you want to do, Joanna. I couldn't stand it."

"So you left?"

"I ... I met some people, two men and a woman ..." She paused. "This is ridiculous, I can't remember their names!" Suddenly panic crossed her face. "I lived with them for four months and I can't remember their names! What's happened to me?"

Chantal reached out and touched her hand lightly. "I'm sure it's nothing serious. Lapses of memory are not uncommon in light of what has happened to you. Please continue." She truthfully wasn't sure what it was, but in order to keep the girl talking she decided not to distress her.

"We went to Yemen. Everyone talks about it, how free and casual the lifestyle is, how open the people are."

Chantal nodded; she knew about Yemen, everyone did. Argellius II was a very popular place to escape to and be yourself. She forced away the memories of how many selves she had been there.

"We ... we ran out of money very fast there, I remember that." She paused again. "My God, that's all I remember. What have I done to myself? Am I going crazy? They say that some narcotics will do that to you, but I'm a nurse, I've read about it, I knew what was safe. Why can't I remember?" Sapphire eyes turned to the Capellan and spilled their tears. "Help me ... please help me."

"I'm trying, but there are pieces missing."

"What happened on Yemen?" she asked suddenly. "They say I tried to kill myself. Do you know why?"

Chantal lowered her eyes, wondering how to play this. If the girl was affected mentally -- and she could have been, she knew -- telling her the truth could push her over the edge. On the other hand, the truth might jolt her memory back by neutralizing the mental barrier. The problem felt mathematical somehow. The possible subtraction of the girl would be relevant only personally, and only to McCoy, as the chance was very slight that she would have valuable information, or more precisely that she would be able to reveal it if she had it. Getting to the bottom of this was worth the risk. "I will tell you what I know," she said at last. "I met you some nights back in an inn called *Le Chat Gris*. You were with two women of my acquaintance known as Leithe and Dree. We talked and drank until your ... until Dr. McCoy came to our table."

"I met Daddy there, too?"

"He did not recognize you ... do you know why?"

"My clothes ... yes. I changed my appearance to go with a new identity tape, and a new name. I didn't know what would happen but it seemed like a good idea when they advised me."

"They? Your ... companions?"

Joanna nodded. "Please go on."

"He came to our table and talked for some time. Then ... then you ... you went upstairs with him."

"I ... I couldn't have, he's my father, I couldn't ..."

"You didn't recognize him, he was merely another man."

"That's insane, how could I not recognize my own father?"

"The same way you cannot remember the names of the people you lived with since you left the colony."

Joanna sank back onto the pillows, her eyes closed. "It often happened, when we needed money. It didn't matter, it wasn't any more than any other job, not really, and it paid much better." She opened her eyes suddenly. "Do you think that's terrible?"

"People do what they have to in order to survive."

"I ... I went upstairs with him," she repeated. "We ..."

Chantal nodded. "There have been confirming medical reports."

"And he never knew it was me?"

"Your performance was faultless," she said, knowing, as she mentally reviewed the medical reports, that it had been in more ways than one. "As much so as your disguise." Chantal wondered suddenly if there was the possibility that McCoy had somehow been drugged, and made a mental note to order a blood test for him, despite the time that had passed, in case traces of some substance still lingered.

"Then what happened?"

"The next thing he recalls is waking up and finding you unconscious. Being a doctor he realized after a brief examination that you had taken something to kill yourself. He called the ship for an emergency medical team, fortunately just in time."

"He knows now it was me. When did he find out?"

"He found some piece of jewelry with your belongings, he said he gave it to you some time ago."

"The locket," she nodded. "He gave that to me for my birthday, the year before he and Momma were divorced." Her musing ended, she looked very concerned. "He knows all this. He must be dying inside."

Chantal looked somber. "You remember nothing at all?"

"Nothing."

"At no time could you perhaps have realized the truth and ... and perhaps felt so ... ashamed? ... that you wanted to die?"

"No, I don't remember at all."

"Mr. Spock tried to meld with you. There is a Vulcan technique of merging minds, I'm sure you know of it. He was unable to, he says you have a barrier placed there."

"But how? I don't ..."

"Have you ever been hypnotized?"

"No, not ever ... my god, I mean not that I can remember. Perhaps during the time I cannot remember."

"Perhaps indeed."

"But that can't be true, I know what you're thinking and it can't be true. It's common knowledge that a person can't be hypnotized to do something totally contrary to their nature. You can't hypnotize a person to murder unless something in them would do it anyway if they had the opportunity."

"Precisely so."

"But that means that something inside me, inside my mind, would have wanted to ... No, I can't believe that. I love Daddy, I would never hurt him like that."

"Not even to get revenge for all the years he neglected you?"

"NO!" She was crying hysterically and Chantal regretted having speculated out loud. Further pursuit of the situation would be pointless.

"I'll call Dr. Geraldo to bring you a sedative," she said gently. Looking through the bedside cabinet, she found a box of throwies and handed one to the girl, who dabbed at her wet eyes.

"My father must trust you a great deal to have told you all this," she said, swallowing sobs.

"The Doctor and I have ... an understanding," Chantal offered noncommittally.

Joanna's eyes blazed suddenly. "How can you be so cold? You've heard things about two people, from their own lips, that are enough to destroy them and yet you're completely unruffled."

"I'm sorry if I seem to be unsympathetic," Chantal said, somewhat taken by surprise.

"No you're not," Joanna spat back, "you don't care at all. You're the Security Chief ... you're like police, all you care about is the job."

"And I do it as well as I can, Miss McCoy. Please rest. I'll send for Dr. Geraldo now."

"May I come in?" Kirk stood ceremoniously in the doorway, looking across the room at Chantal, who was seated at her desk.

She wanted to say no but realized she wasn't allowed the luxury. Too, she wanted to know what McCoy had told him, if anything, even more than she wanted to continue trying to fit the pieces together. As far as she was concerned, they all fitted perfectly, but trying to tell Kirk without revealing herself completely was going to prove a formidable task.

"Yes, of course. I was on my way to find you." She proffered a demure look. "I require permission to beam to the surface, there are two people I wish to talk to."

"About the Demuth case?"

"What else is there?"

Kirk helped himself to a chair.

"May I pour you a drink, Captain?" She gestured to the decanter on her desk.

"Maybe, what is it?"

"It's cifo, or at least a reasonable facsimile. It's a liquor begat from grains on my home planet. We don't export it but other distilleries have tried to copy it. Nothing is as good as the original but this is a rather decent imitation." She filled a small glass and extended it to him.

"It tastes like Scotch," he said after a sip and a stifled gasp. "You always drink it straight?"

"Straight?" She fumbled mentally with the word. "Oh ... without a ... chaser?"

"Mix," he corrected.

"Usually. If one wants to drink it, why alter its taste?"

"I never thought of it that way but you're probably correct. What do you want to do on the surface? I've been five steps behind you all day and I hope you have something to tell me, no one else has."

"Dr. McCoy ... "

"... hemmed and hawed for nearly half an hour then said that you would tell me."

"But you've talked to Spock?"

"Another dead end. He said he told you, too; the meld didn't work. I'm not sure I understand all the refinements of telepathy, but he seems to think someone has imposed a mental barrier in her mind to prohibit any kind of probing."

"I agree with him."

"But you talked to Miss Demuth?" Kirk tried diligently not to sound exasperated but he was. Anything that felt even remotely like losing control made him angry, and this situation had been out of his control from the start. He had come to realize Chantal Caberfae was very good at her work, he had watched her very carefully in the Kzinti combat and had recommended her for a commendation. Working under pressure with her was one thing -- the immediate necessities of battle, the quickened pace -- quite frankly, everything moved along at a speed that suited him. But this sitting back and letting her take the reins was galling.

"I would like to have the opportunity to confirm some of the things she told me before making any definitive statements, sir," she said as meekly as possible. Why hadn't McCoy told him? She definitely did not want to be the one to tell him what really happened, but unless she could provide a better alternative it was beginning to look like she would have to.

She was doing it again. Why? "Lieutenant, I realize I'm only the Captain of this ship, but I think I'm entitled to some answers."

"I would not want to make any conclusive statements before I have more facts, sir. I am trained in police work, sir, and over the years have found my methods satisfactory."

"What have you done over the years?"

"Sir, my personnel file is easily obtained if you want a career biography."

"Your personnel file is suspiciously vague, Lieutenant."

"Perhaps you should take that up with Commodore Caidan since he compiled most of it," she said airily.

"Lieutenant ..." He told himself not to lose his temper but felt he was losing the battle. "Lieutenant, I want to know what's going on, I want some answers."

"Very well, but they will be incomplete until I have more data."

She was doing it again, she was sounding just like Spock. He realized that they didn't seem to get along at all and wondered why that was, since they behaved so much alike at times. "At this point, Lieutenant, I'll take what I can get."

"Very briefly, sir, I feel that Miss Demuth has been the unknowing victim of a ... a conspiracy, if you will, much the same as McCoy has been. I feel certain that none of her actions were prompted by him or anything he did to her."

"But who? Lieutenant, this isn't getting any clearer. Who would want to cause trouble for McCoy? I can't imagine he has any enemies, at least not any that would go to such elaborate lengths."

"I don't think the situation has been aimed at McCoy specifically but rather at all of us."

"I don't follow."

"Neither do I, sir, at least not completely, and I won't until I go to the surface and find a few more answers."

"You sound pretty certain, Lieutenant."

"Nothing is very certain, sir. It's ... another notion, shall we say?"

"Very well, Lieutenant," he sighed obviously. "Permission granted. When will you go?"

"As soon as possible."

"You'll take a Security party?"

"No, sir, I'd prefer to go alone."

"I don't want anything happening to anyone else of my crew."

"I really am quite capable of taking care of myself. With discretion being the better part of everything, I would be less conspicuous alone."

His mind retreated to the sight of her in the transporter room when he returned with McCoy. "Lieutenant, one thing you'll never be in inconspicuous." He left the chair and went to the door. "I'll want a full report, complete with conclusions, when you come on duty again." With that he left.

She went to her wardrobe and began to remove the clothes she would wear on the surface. She hoped she wouldn't have to go to the Dragon Chateau to find Leithe and Dree, the chance of being recognized was too great, but she would if she had to. What happened seemed quite obvious to her, the girl was used, and whether it was luck or plot that she was related to McCoy was probably irrelevant. Someone wanted another incident on Yemen, another incident involving the *Enterprise*. The new Council seemed the type that would not need much urging to take action, but the unknown factor, her acquaintanceship with Belland, had nullified that. Of that she felt quite proud, she had accomplished a minor victory against her great enemy. All that was left was to ascertain that it was him and see if she could pick up the trail. Caidan would want complete details, infinitely more so than Kirk would require, when she next saw him.

On the surface Chantal found that luck was running with her, and she wondered casually how Fate would make her pay for it in the future. Leithe and Dree, true to their words, of where they spent their own time, were at *Le Chat Gris*, for the keeper there took a smaller percentage of their earnings than they were required to turn over at the Chateau. What Joanna had forgotten, they did not; they remembered quite well the companions she had who initially brought her to the Chateau. Chantal had met only one of them before, one of the men, Servagni, and as she knew who was his Master, her suspicions were confirmed. The three had been with Joanna for some time, introducing her to all manner of exotica before bringing her to the Chateau. Leithe and Dree met her there, and to an extent replaced her companions when they seemed to mysteriously fade into the background. They remembered very clearly that it was Jory's idea to go to *Le Chat Gris* that night. Chantal wondered

how she had known McCoy would be there but the fact remained that she had, and so, evidently, had someone else.

Dawn was approaching as she sat at a table along the wall in the inn. One of these days, she thought absently, she was going to see one of the famed Yemenite sunrises from the outside of a tavern. But not tonight. She would finish her drink and return to the ship. Oddly, she felt the most formidable task was yet to come, turning the entire situation into something she could safely tell Kirk. More than ever she lamented the fact that Caidan refused to let him know her real purpose aboard. But he was probably right, he always was. She remembered suddenly what he had said about Kirk and the *Enterprise*, "things just happen to that ship ... Kirk makes them happen." Fleet scuttlebutt seemed to agree that many people felt that way, and that was why she chose it. Her enemy would be where there was trouble, that was his business, and hers was to find him, ever in the background, careful not to reveal his fine hand before it was time. She finished her drink and left the inn, preparing to signal the transporter room to beam her aboard.

The intercom buzzer sounded insistently, even through the pillow she had pulled over her head. Chantal tried to ignore it. Finally, it stopped. She threw the pillow off the bed and turned over.

"Lieutenant Caberfae, report to Sickbay immediately."

Uhura's voice jolted her to consciousness and she sat up suddenly, rubbing sleep from her eyes. The chronometer did nothing to make her feel better when it told her she'd had but two hours sleep. She forced herself to walk to the desk to take the call.

"Caberfae here. What is it, Lieutenant?"

"The Captain wants you to report to Sickbay on the double, Chantal," Uhura said, her tone softening. "Sorry to wake you but something is going on down there."

Chantal muffled a yawn. "I'm on my way as soon as I'm dressed." She flipped the switch and cut the connection, then stumbled wearily to her closet, tripping over her red patent dress shoes as she did so. Her clothes from the night before lay unceremoniously across her desk chair and as she reached into the closet she noticed she was about to put on her last clean uniform.

She wondered about the urgent call. Perhaps Joanna had decided to confess all to someone else. Or perhaps ... It was useless to speculate, she decided. Dressed, she ran a brush through her hair and elected to braid it on her way to Sickbay.

As she approached Sickbay her suspicions increased when she saw one of her own staff standing before the door, coming to attention as he saw her.

"I ordered no one to stand guard here," she said perfunctorily, hoping to get some clue from him in order to prepare herself somewhat before she faced whatever lay waiting on the other side of the door.

"Captain's orders, Lieutenant. No one is to be admitted without his authorization."

She shrugged. "As you were, Ensign."

He stepped aside, the door slid open, and she entered, hearing it close behind her. The tableau she faced stunned her. She looked across the outer office into the ward. McCoy was seated in a chair, his head in his hands. Kirk stood behind him, a hand on the Doctor's shoulder. Dr. Geraldo stood next to them, talking to Kirk. In the bed where she had last seen Joanna McCoy, a figure was covered with a sheet. Forcing all emotion from her mind, she approached them, but Kirk saw her and met her halfway. She didn't like the look on his face, not a bit.

"The girl is dead," he told her. "Evidently she ransacked the place until she found something sharp enough to slash her wrists. Geraldo says he gave her a sedative, but she either didn't take it or it wasn't strong enough for the state she was in." His breath seemed to come in short spurts and his face was flushed. "I brought McCoy here to tell him and he is so emotionally upset that now Geraldo's sedating him. Lieutenant, I've got a dead civilian aboard, a covered up scandal on the surface, and a chief medical officer who appears to be at the brink of his sanity. What the devil is going on? You promised me some answers and I want them now. Why is McCoy reacting this way? What was that girl to him? Why did she kill herself on my ship?"

It's a pattern in my life, Chantal reflected as she looked ahead into the ward. Fate wreaks havoc as it wills and I'm required to put the pieces back together to everyone's satisfaction. Her eyes turned to Kirk who was bordering on livid. She realized that if she was capable of fearing any man, it would be him. She empathized greatly with his frustration. "Her name wasn't Demuth," she said quietly, "it was McCoy. That is ... was ... his daughter, Joanna."

Kirk felt as though he'd received a physical blow. "You're not serious."

She nodded.

"She can't be. Joanna's a nurse on some colony lightyears from here --"



"She was, sir. She left some months back."

"Wait, I'm missing something. Start from the beginning, Lieutenant, from the very absolute beginning. Slowly."

"She left, by her own account, about four months ago. I have read about such situations, they seem somewhat common to young people with her problems, an unpleasant home situation, family problems. Everyone, I feel, goes through a time -- perhaps recurrent times -- when they wish to escape their obligations and do what they please. She met some ... some people, they encouraged her. She left with them and eventually came to Yemen. I think it is fairly safe to deduce that they were not a good influence on her."

Kirk waved a hand -- he didn't want a psychology lesson -- then paused, staring at her. "Lieutenant, you and I were both at the inn that night, we saw them, she went upstairs with McCoy and they ... Chantal, he's her father, she wouldn't."

She shrugged. "My investigations substantiate that she was not rational during the time, sir. Perhaps due to drugs or a posthypnotic suggestion that removed inhibitions about cultural taboos."

"Someone did this to her?"

"No, sir," she said, regretting that she had revealed as much of the truth to him as she did and hoping that she could eventually turn the admission that she was wrong to her benefit. "Not precisely. I was in grave error to consider any plot on a grandiose scale but I had warned you that I could not make valid statements before my trip to the surface. I am satisfied that she acted on her own."

"Why, Chantal? Why would she do this to herself, and to him? Could she hate him so much?"

"I can't answer that, sir. As I said, she wasn't rational, and her feelings toward him have been developing, diverging, and simply compounding themselves over the years. I assume you know about the Doctor's personal life."

"He's paid for his sins, his wife died suffering terribly, and he ... he missed the girl, he really did."

"But when she needed him, he wasn't there. An absentee father is worse than none at all for a girl. So much of her outlook on life and her place in it lies balanced on her relationship with her father. It can affect one very deeply." The look on Kirk's face disturbed her for some reason she couldn't fathom. "You will forgive the speculation, sir," she added. "She wasn't rational, whatever the cause, and it would seem to be this was her final revenge on him."

"To break two of the strongest taboos society has and let him live the rest of his life knowing he was the cause of it all?" He turned toward the ward and saw Geraldo leading McCoy to a bed. "It would have been better for him if she had merely killed him."

"The dead don't suffer," Chantal said quietly before she realized she had spoken aloud.

Kirk looked at her, despairing of ever understanding her. He had the distinct impression she was speaking not from book-learning but from her own experiences, and he knew he couldn't ask her. Suddenly he felt the completely mad urge to take her in his arms, as though she needed consoling like a frightened child, as though she was seeing herself or some part of herself in Joanna. Then he realized she saw him staring.

"Is that how your log stands?" he asked finally, feeling completely drained.

"Yes, sir. I would like to leave McCoy out entirely, but eventually, when all the data is cross-referenced, the omission would be unexplainable. I have, however, simply stated that Miss McCoy, alias Demuth, being in an advancedly disturbed state due to emotional problems, made two attempts on her life, the second being successful. I have deleted the references to the other incidents on the surface, there was no point to mentioning them. He will have enough to live with the rest of his life. I will stand by the entry, sir."

"Why would you lie for someone you don't even know?" Kirk asked suddenly.

"There is a difference between lying and withholding all the facts, sir. These omissions have no bearing on the actuality we have to report. Before we break orbit I would like to see Consul Belland to make certain his report will be similar."

"And mine will match yours," Kirk nodded. "Now that we've put a nice wrapper on this hideous mess, I wish I had an equally tidy solution for him."

"Keep him working," she said solemnly. "Humans have a proclivity for brooding that is decidedly unhealthy psychologically. Find him a plague to cure, find him anything, but keep him working. That's the only answer."

"Why do you care about him?" Kirk couldn't resist asking.

"He came to my planet many years ago, as well as many times since. Had Fate deigned it so, he could have been my father instead of the stranger to our world who was."

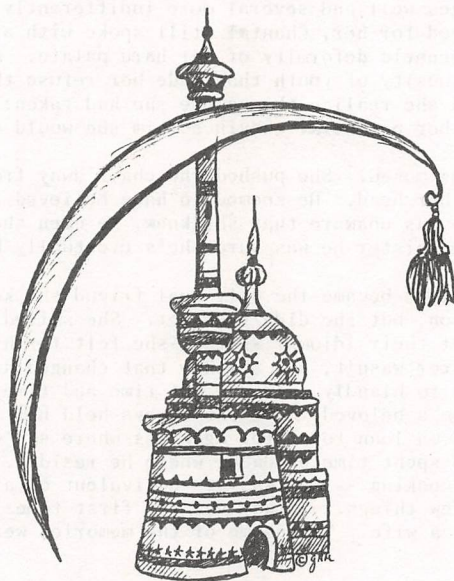
"I wouldn't have suspected such a streak of sentimentality, Lieutenant" he ventured with a faint smile.

"Neither would I, sir, neither would I."

"I'm due on the bridge," he said, walking away from her. "We're getting the hell away from here in one standard hour. If you're going downstairs, don't be late." The smile again, and he left.

Chantal stepped quietly into the Sickbay ward. Joanna's body had been removed sometime during the course of her discussion with Kirk and the only occupant was McCoy, at the end of the room. Seeing no one else about, she quietly approached the bed. The ravages of the events of the past few days still showed on his face even in the sedative-induced sleep. Perhaps something could be arranged on Babel to distract him. The last thing he needed was more free time to brood in. She felt tremendously sad that she couldn't tell him the truth, at least not yet, even though it was only partial truth, for she was fairly certain the girl couldn't have been so well programmed had there not been some desire for revenge within her subconscious although it was probably likely that she would never had employed it. *You're getting soft, she told herself, letting the job affect you like this, and getting soft is dangerous. This entire venture is meant to bring you closer to the Target and these people are just playing their parts; there's no room for sentiment.* But the look on McCoy's face, even at rest, caught her somehow and tugged til it hurt. Gently, she took his hand in her two and touched it to her cheek. "I wish you were my father," she said. "It wouldn't change anything but the present, yet that would be enough."

Chantal left Sickbay, nodding politely at Dr. Geraldo who had just entered. Now there were only 45 minutes before the *Enterprise* would leave orbit and she, as always, had another job to do. Squaring her shoulders and straightening to her full height, she walked to the transporter room.



Idols I Have Loved



by *mandi schultz*
& *cheryl rice*

*"Indeed the Idols I have loved so long
Have done my credit in this World much wrong."*

-Edward Fitzgerald - Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám

Seated at her desk, Chantal yawned, then performed two brief isometric exercises. They didn't help. She looked at the tapes -- the new month's yield of business -- strewn across her desk and once again picked up the light pen. The writing board was actually a computer terminal, its writing surface a cathode-ray tube. Its uses were many and varied aboard the ship; primarily it was employed when data and information most conveniently written needed to be fed into the computer.

As Chief of Security, Chantal was reviewing all the new business passed to her department, making notes as she went along of details she needed to add to her department's routine. She would place them with the computer now and refer to them as needed. She much preferred the written form to the vocal though she realized the preference was pure neurosis on her part. She didn't like speaking aloud in an empty room; it felt like talking to herself, a habit that could prove mortally dangerous in her profession. She also preferred to read back her notes rather than have them assail her ears: she disliked her own voice intensely. Even though she spoke many languages well and several more indifferently, and despite the finest voice coaches Commodore Caidan had engaged for her, Chantal still spoke with a pronounced accent, some of which was no doubt attributable to the genetic deformity of her hard palate. As she had grown older, she'd chided herself often for the impetuosity of youth that made her refuse the second surgery to correct what the first did not. Only later did she realize the gamble she had taken: after Todmeister heard her speak, only Caidan's intense promises of her potential convinced him she would ever be able to hold the job she had.

Caidan always had faith in her, she mused. She pushed the chair away from the desk, then removed the pins that kept her braids coiled about her head. He seemed to have believed in her since the first time they met -- lifetimes ago. Although he was unaware that she knew, he even shouldered the costs for her specialized training, just to prove to Todmeister he was sure she'd eventually be a credit to the organization.

She liked Paul Caidan a great deal; he became the only real friend she knew. In the beginning he took inordinate pleasure in playing Pygmalion, but she didn't object. She smiled, remembering something much like puppy love -- where did Terrans get their idioms? -- that she felt for him in the early days. He was always honest with her, even when Todmeister wasn't, and somehow that changed her feelings for him. It was not easy to love someone who was going to blandly send you out time and time again to risk your life; you'd begin to expect something more from a beloved. Yet she always held him important. He was a good superior, that she learned the hard way when on loan to sister agencies where she could compare him to others. He was also good company and so she often spent time on Babel where he resided. They had many mutual interests -- 20th century Earth books; Spician cooking -- hex was its equivalent of a cordon bleu chef; the music of the neoclassicist Ilchaim, to name a few things. It was not the first time it crossed her mind that she was as close to him as a daughter, if not a wife. Yes, some of the memories were golden. Retrospect could gild a great deal.

Chantal doubted, however, that retrospect would do very much to improve upon the immediate past. McCoy had been relieved of his duties and Dr. Gerald was keeping him constantly, albeit mildly, sedated, ever since Joanna had taken her own life. The *Enterprise* was awaiting new orders, most of which were incoming that day, so was Chantal, but from a different source. Since she had heard no more from Caidan, Chantal assumed that missive too would come with Kirk's orders, in words whose true meaning only she would comprehend. She was due to report to Todmeister and the Commodore would arrange it. She looked forward to it. The incidents

surrounding Joanna McCoy's death needed fresh insight. She was too close, perhaps there were things she had overlooked.

There would also be the opportunity of talking to both of her superiors about the situation with Kirk. Although she didn't like admitting it, operating under cover on his ship was more difficult than she had anticipated. Kirk had to be told something, even if it was another manufactured truth. On her own, she had already decided to do so even without their permission. It would make her job easier, she was convinced, and she'd tend to the consequences if and when they presented themselves. Perhaps she would tell him, quite confidentially, that she was working for Internal Affairs ...

The door buzzer sounded and she sighed, not wishing to see anyone but realizing that on duty she had no choice. Things like that made her very glad indeed that the *Enterprise* assignment was not permanent -- despite the many times she tried, she didn't like military life.

"Come." She pulled the chair up to the desk once more.

Kirk stepped through the doorway and gestured that she remain seated. He hadn't seen her for several days and had actually felt the better for it until he told himself that if she did disturb him so badly then why was he thinking about her so much? He didn't need to see her, she was ever with him. Damn, he thought, why her? She was everything he'd been determinedly opposed to -- she was a crewman, and a junior officer even though she was a department head, and that was always a problem. But more than that was the obvious problem that she was so ... unbreachable. And still it didn't put him off. He didn't like to admit it but there had been women like that, unruffleable, in his life. He had refused the challenge -- certain defeat was no contest and certainly no boost to morale. He had almost an emotional radar that protected him. But what went wrong over Chantal? She seemed to have all the earmarks of that fearsome type but something inside him remained unconvinced.

"Good morning, sir," she said, twirling the end of one braid between her fingers.

"Afternoon, Lieutenant," he said, "and late afternoon at that." He thought she looked almost adolescent with her hair in two tails. "Orders coming in now on the Starfleet channel. When they're completed Uhura will pipe them in here on visual. Commodore Caidan asked that you be on hand. I --"

"Bridge to Captain Kirk," a melodious voice came on the intercom.

Chantal moved a graceful six-fingered hand to point out the intercom on her desk.

"Kirk here." He allowed himself the momentary luxury of once again making note of the large ornate ring her hand bore and wondered if she was vain enough to wear it to call attention to that hand.

Uhura's face materialized on the desk viewer. "Message from Starfleet completed, sir."

"Go ahead, Lieutenant. I'm with Lieutenant Caberfae now."

"Coming through, sir."

Kirk divided his attentions among the message itself, the viewscreen image, and his companion. *So that's Caidan*, he thought at the appearance of the suave smooth face. He remembered him without knowing precisely from where -- a state dinner, perhaps. Chantal's attention seemed riveted on the screen by the sound of the voice though her face was calm -- was she smiling? -- and here and there she would nod at something he said. He wondered if she loved this man who seemed to figure so strongly in her career life at least. Kirk couldn't read her face and he told himself that was yet another warning about her. The message ended and the channel closed. He saw Chantal fold her arms and lean back in her chair.

"It would seem the Commodore was dissatisfied with our report about the Joanna McCoy incident," Kirk said.

She shook her head. "I don't think so. Considering the delicate as well as complex nature of the entire situation, I rather expected he would want my report in person."

"And so the *Enterprise* is to proceed with all haste to Babel where you can do so evidently at the Commodore's leisure, since he requests you be temporarily relieved of your duties for two weeks."

"I would assume, sir, that the inevitable red tape has something to do with it, not to mention the formalities. It's not my idea of a holiday."

"What is?" he ventured.

She elevated her eyes thoughtfully for a moment. "On Yemen there's an island, Coven by name. There must have been volcanic activity at one time because the beaches are covered with black sand and when the moonlight touches them they appear bejeweled." She paused, then looked at him. "I've not been there in years," she added, returning to reality and realizing she'd just been induced to let down her guard. She wasn't sure she liked it. "Shall I arrange for someone to replace me or would you prefer to do so?" she asked, purposely bringing the conversation back into place.

"Do you have someone in mind?"

"Charleton," she nodded.

Kirk was quite surprised by her selection. Months before, she'd put Charleton in Sickbay with a broken tailbone after he'd taken a training exercise too seriously. It had been said that before the incident he had been quite vocal over the matter of having a female Security Chief. "I'm surprised."

"Why? He's the most capable."

That was like her, he thought. She hated him but she wouldn't minimize his qualifications. "Very well, I'll consider it."

"When will we reach Babel?"

"Proceeding with all haste," he cleared his throat, "in about 48 hours." There was an awkward silence while he tried to anticipate the next topic she'd bring up.

"How is the Doctor?"

Kirk decided to sit, as much as he was enjoying her having to look up at him for a change. He shook his head. "The same, more or less. He's ... he's fine. I mean he'd be fine if he were anyone else. He's lucid, coherent, he eats, sleeps. But ..." he clenched his fist and punished the arm of the chair, "he's just not himself."

"What will happen?"

"Good God, what can? I imagine we should consider it fortunate that he's still rational. Chantal, --" he ventured her first name, -- "if he doesn't snap out of it, Starfleet Command will have to be notified. The Surgeon General will have to assign a replacement. But dammit, after what happened, how can anyone be justified in expecting him to behave as if nothing did?"

"But as we both know, Command will. Can Spock help him?"

He sighed. "I'm sure if he could, or would, he'd say so. You know," he remembered, "he's still doing some very unVulcan sulking over that mindmeld."

Chantal looked innocent.

"We were both wrong," Kirk continued, expecting her to assault him with defenses that never came. "We did have other options, regressive memory, psychotricorder read-out ..."

"They wouldn't have succeeded."

"No, but we should have tried them first."

"We did not have the time," she reaffirmed, caring not the least about the Vulcan's bruised dignity. "Mr. Spock was ... how would you say it? ... the shortest distance to our objective."

"Perhaps, but our premise was faulty. And even if it had worked, nothing learned in a meld is admissible legal evidence." He closed his eyes and passed a hand over his face. "Not that it makes any difference now. It was my decision. They're always my decisions, and it seems the longer I have to make them, the more unpleasant they become. Now what happens to McCoy will rely on my decision."

"Allow him to accompany me to Babel," she asked before she realized it.

"What? Do you think that's necessary? I don't think he can take much more. The inquiries would be too much of a strain. Surely you can make your testimonies without him?"

She shook her head, just then realizing she hadn't recoiled her braids. "No, that's not what I mean. Let him come to Babel with me for a rest. Perhaps a change in surroundings ..." She had her idea but she couldn't know for certain until she checked with Caidan, and even then she could probably never tell Kirk all of it.

"Do you really think it'll help?" he asked intensely.

"I think we must try."

He nodded. "Very well. At this point, I'm sure it can't hurt."

Chantal couldn't sleep. She pummeled the pillow into shape once more and turned on her side. They would be at Babel when the day shift went on duty and the affairs of the next two weeks were going to require master manipulating.

Since she already mentioned it to Kirk it was too late to do anything but play out her hunch for McCoy. She could predict what Caidan, and Todmeister, would say to her request but she felt compelled to ask. There were ways of reversing "shellshock", the catch-all phrase used in the agency to describe the variety of undesirable psychological conditions field agents could succumb to. Perhaps one of the specialists could help McCoy.

Her motivation disturbed her. She was getting too close to these *Enterprise* people. It was becoming increasingly difficult to maintain her hitherto steadfast rule to never get involved with regulars on the job. *It is stupid, she told herself, just plain stupid, to do so. It makes you vulnerable and that means you might not think clearly, and that means you could die before your time.*

But Joanna McCoy, very likely because of what I told her, died before her time, she thought, startling herself. It shouldn't bother her, but it did, even though it had to be done the way she did it. The girl was not important, she was no loss, Chantal tried to tell herself. No, no loss except to a lonely man who had nothing else and now had nothing at all. A man who had been very kind to me, she noted.

No, there was no way to rationalize wanting to help McCoy because she'd been instrumental in hurting him. She knew what Caidan would say but she was determined to pressure him if need be. The agency owed her; they were in her debt, if they chose to remember. She would force them to. She couldn't understand her concern but neither could she ignore it. *Something's happening to me, she appraised as clinically as possible, perhaps I'm getting old. More likely the job is, or at least this job is.* Even though there were other intermitant assignments, her search for the Man had dominated the fifteen Standard years she had been working as an agent. Sometimes she felt very old indeed.

Still, world weariness was occasionally an appreciable commodity: it made one less susceptible to many of life's temptations. Like Kirk. She was very unhappy about the turns their relationship was taking. It had entirely too much potential. If only she didn't regret so often what she was doing to him because of the secrecy she had to maintain. It made her think about him all the more. Kirk was a definite type and one she was familiar with to some extent. The loneliness he exuded was almost tangible to her. She always felt the worst loneliness was the kind one experienced when there were people at hand: you ached, you reached, but no one could help you. Because of it, he obviously sublimated ferociously. There was no one woman, so to him there were all women. Most likely there was no family, or at least not the kindred feeling of one, so the crew became the family--but he would never be to them what they were to him. The ship and his command were his life's blood, even though they were bleeding him continuously. As the years passed, the more important they became, and too, the closer the time came that he would lose them. An unenviable circle. It seemed apparent to her that these things must be closing in on him and that accounted for the uncharacteristic behavior. She felt very sad --

Dammit, stop feeling, she told herself, stop feeling anything at all for him, there just is not enough time. You cannot become involved with him, you don't want to, you don't need to become involved with a starship captain who's showing enough neuroses and idiosyncrasies to fill several chapters of Psychology of the Command Personality.

I never thought he'd notice me, she heard Chantal-the-girl say, but he does, and more all the time. I've seen him, seen him staring at me. Not that he's ever done anything more. Perhaps he doesn't like what he sees, Terran men do not usually like tall women. When I catch him staring he looks embarrassed. I wonder why? What can he be thinking about when he looks at me? She sighed. No doubt that it'd be preferable to have Charleton as the S.C. instead of this tactless -- alien -- woman who can't keep her place, whatever that might be. *That's not what I want him to think, I --*

-- have to talk to Caidan. I'm losing my objectivity about this situation. Perhaps I should be transferred to another ship. I --

-- have to go to sleep. I'm not coherent. I only wish that --

Exhausted physically, Chantal slipped into a restive sleep of dreams she'd rather not have had.

Kirk went to the bridge as the day shift came on duty, nodding indifferently to those who passed him. He decided to see the Supply Master, something had to be done about his mattress. He had a crink in his neck and his back ached -- it had to be a too-soft mattress. Rubbing the back of his neck he stepped into the turbolift and went to the bridge.

"Status report, Mr. Sulu," he requested as he took his chair.

"We can establish orbit around Babel in approximately thirty minutes, sir."

Kirk sighed, barely audibly. Babel made him think about the old airports he'd read about in the second half of Earth's 20th century when air traffic was so heavy that the controllers would keep the crafts circling overhead in holding patterns for hours because of the limited number of landing strips to accommodate the vehicles. Likewise the traffic around Babel was incredible. No other place in the Federation, not even Earth's main space ports, could match it. The *Enterprise* had reduced speed as soon as it got within the prescribed distance, and with any luck, when they reached Babel, the ground controllers would be able to give them an orbit route. No matter what day, what time of year, what hour, Babel was always busy.

The Captain thought about how much he would like two weeks on Babel and felt mildly embarrassed as to why. The food there was fabulous. Dining facilities were many and varied, in order to meet the needs of the multitude of important personages who lived on as well as came to Babel from time to time. Any style, any nationality, every gourmet delicacy, any common fare, from any place in the Federation and a few places that weren't, that one might care to feast on could be found in at least one of the restaurants. For a person who enjoyed food, and James Kirk was such a person, it was paradise.

A great admirer of wines and cheeses, Kirk's particular favorite was Der Goldene Topf which specialized in those two items exclusively. It was an extremely comfortable place, dim lights, floor cushions at low tables, brazier lamps -- an Arabian Nights motif not unlike his favorite haunts on Yemen, he realized suddenly. There was no menu: a patron merely requested the wine and cheese he desired, and it was to the utmost embarrassment of the house if they didn't carry it. In fact the owner had boasted to Kirk -- who once ordered Nitsuaevets, a most obscure cheese, just to see what would happen when they couldn't produce it -- only they did -- that never had anyone requested something they didn't have. He often wished they had a menu, that way he could start from the top and work his way down and his palate into delighted satiation. Still, he was content to continue ordering his favorites or letting the attendant suggest items. He liked few things better than to relax there in the soothing half-light and the restful music. A man could collect himself there, or just forget himself.

"We're approaching Babel now, sir," Sulu told him. "Orbit in five minutes."

Kirk turned to face Uhura. "Contact their CenComm, tell them we'll be sending Lieutenant Caberfae down soon. In fact, notify Commodore Caidan that we've arrived." He pushed himself from the chair and walked to the turbolift. "I'll be in the transporter room."

Chantal was sitting on the edge of the transporter deck, a totally full dufflebag at her feet, her legs crossed. The Supply Master -- and he seemed much harrassed -- finally provided her with the women's alternate duty uniform, a pullover tunic and slacks. She wasn't sure why the other women aboard almost unanimously elected to wear the short skirted variation, but she wasn't going to, not anymore, not if she could help it. She stretched her arms, took momentary note that she had indeed remembered the ring on her hand, and sighed.

The situation was working itself out, step by intricate step. She would beam down first and make some initial arrangements with a doctor whom Caidan would recommend. That would satisfy Kirk as to his friend's well-being and he could then go about his business without dwelling too long on hers. Once planetside, she could make the more complicated arrangements with the agency's psychotechs for McCoy's treatment, and she would, no matter what her superiors said. *Where there is a will*, she thought resolutely ...

The door slid open and Kirk strode through, looking at the Transporter Chief first and then at her. She stood quickly, nimbly sidestepping her luggage.

Her costume surprised him, except for some of the women in Engineering who wore coveralls at times, all the crewwomen opted for some version of the skirted uniform. He didn't especially care about them, but he was going to miss looking at Chantal's legs. "I haven't seen the alternate duty uniform in almost five years, Lieutenant," he said, sure she hadn't noticed him staring.

"It is eminently more practical, sir, at least in my department."

"And I suppose we must bow to practicality."

Chantal felt as though she'd been sniped at without reason -- it was her uniform, and her body she was covering -- why should he care? "Well, the only thing I could think of that would be more practical is a red tunic with a target on the front."

Kirk bristled, positive he's been sniped at, and wondered why she was "doing it" again. He'd come to say goodbye, and to say something on the order of thanking her for trying to help McCoy, and she ruined it. Refusing to admit she'd drawn blood, he forced himself to contain his dignity. "We're in orbit over Babel, Lieutenant, and ready to transport you."

"I will make arrangements for the Doctor immediately upon my arrival," she said, wondering why he didn't react to her flippant remark.

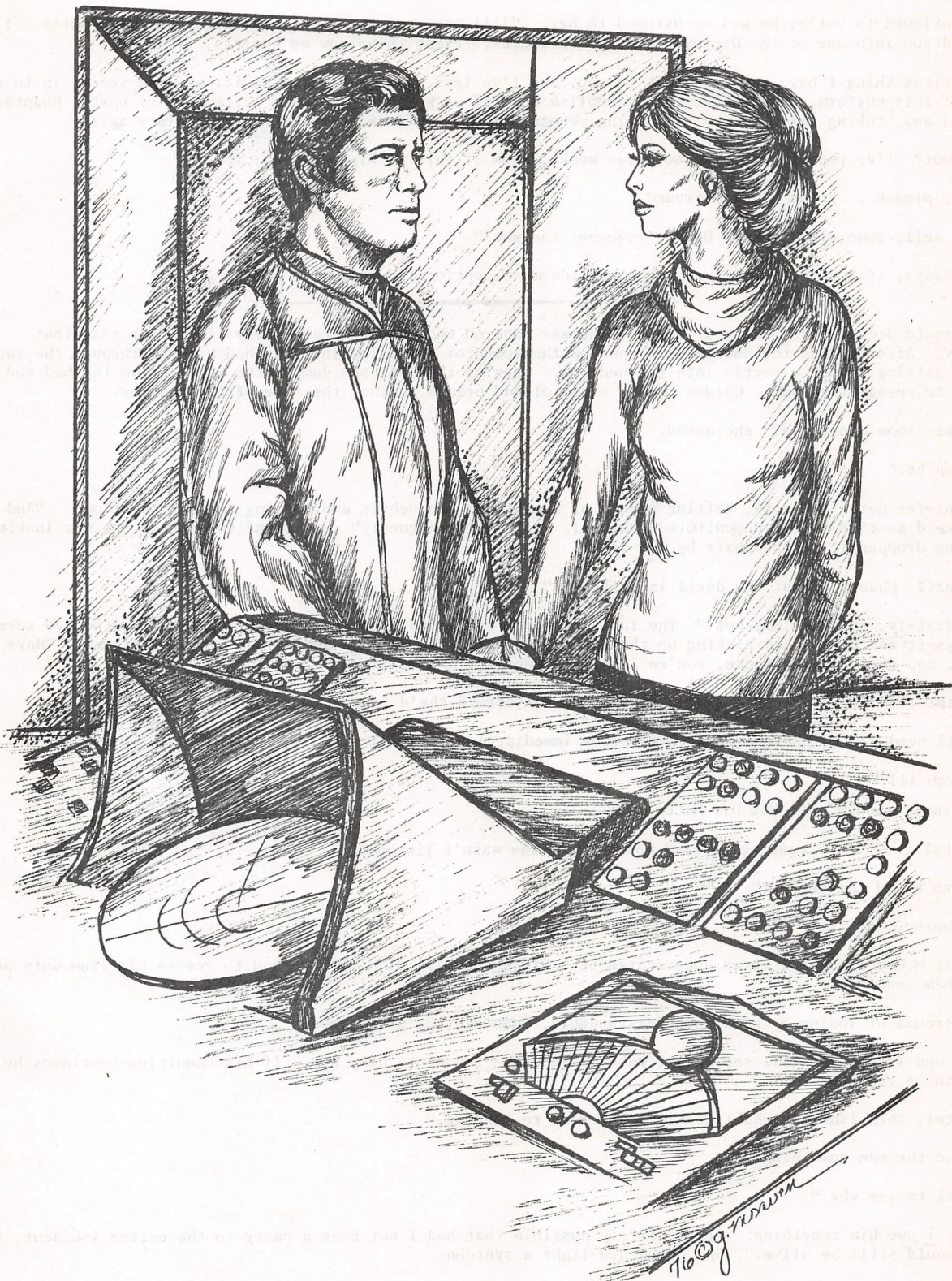
"We're leaving orbit in one hour, Lieutenant, so I suggest you proceed ... with all haste. I hope ..." he paused, hating to stammer, "that everything goes well." He nodded curtly, turned, and stalked out.

Chantal, somewhat bewildered, hoisted her bag over her shoulder and looked at Mr. Kyle.

"Everything's ready, Lieutenant," he said, politely ignoring everything he saw and heard.

She stepped onto the transporter platform and situated herself on one of the pods, her dufflebag on another. She saw Kyle move the controls, the lights flickered, and as her molecules began to separate she thought, *So do I, James Kirk. You have no idea how much.*

Paul Caidan's healthily tanned face was the first thing Chantal's eyes focused on as she integrated. He smiled warmly as he stepped toward the platform and extended a hand to guide her down the steps, not that



she needed it.

"It's so good to see you again, my dear," he said.

"Shouldn't I salute or something similiar?"

He continued to smile; he was accustomed to her. "I'll have someone take your luggage to your suite. I've booked you into one of the Diplomatic Corps vacancies. First thing now we have to ..."

"The first thing I have to do is talk to you, and I've less than an hour to do it in. The second is to get out of this uniform. I think we can accomplish both if we go straight to my ... suite ... now." Chantal turned and, taking her bag from a laboring yeoman, slung it effortlessly over her shoulder again.

"An hour? I've requested you be here two weeks. Now if this is Kirk's idea ..."

"Paul, please ..." she glanced around.

"Very well, come along then. Do you remember the way?"

"As always, if I do not, I'm sure you can guide me exceptionally well."

The ornate decor of the suite of three rooms was lost on Chantal, who cared very little for transient luxury. After coding the doorlock to open on the touch of her palmprint, she had breezed through the two outer sitting rooms, directly into the bedroom. Opening the bag, she dumped the contents on the bed and began to spread them out. Caidan stood, arms folded, braced against the side of the doorway.

"Is this room monitored?" she asked.

"It can be."

"I'd prefer not," she said, hefting a pair of boots from the debris and tossing them on the floor. "And I'll need another suite, unmonitored, as well. I'm having a guest." She found the jacket she was looking for and dropped it on the chair by the bed.

"A guest? Chantal, what the devil is going on?"

"Immediately, my other clothes." The last items she retrieved from the mound of apparel on the bed were a bodysuit and hose, then picking up the boots and jacket she stepped behind the dressing screen. "Have a chair, and feel free to smoke, you're liable to need it."

"Chantal ..." His voice had a warning tone he was afraid she'd ignore.

"I will need you to provide me with a doctor immediately."

"Are you ill?"

"Amazingly enough, no, but Dr. McCoy is."

"Chantal ..." That tone again, and he was sure she wasn't listening.

"You've heard the report?"

"Of course, but ..."

"To say McCoy is unwell is an understatement. Since the girl died they've had to remove him from duty and keep him sedated."

"The trauma of losing a child is understandable, Chantal, but not unique."

"This one is, as you will see when I make my report. I want to help him. If his condition continues he'll have to be replaced."

"Chantal, this isn't a rehabilitation center we're running."

"We owe the man something."

"I fail to see why."

"Paul, I owe him something. It's entirely possible that had I not been a party to the entire incident, the girl would still be alive." She heard him light a syntobac.

"I don't understand any part of this conversation. You've been verbally fencing with the non-agents for so long, you've forgotten to whom you're talking."

She appeared from behind the screen, donning the dark suede jacket. Caidan felt a sensation of wistful sentimentality as he saw what she wore. He knew the outfit to be one of her favorites. She sported it often,

and it always managed to make him feel that way. Chantal was always very modest in appraising herself, at least where her appearance was concerned, and claimed to be at a complete loss to understand why anyone would find it noteworthy. Her clothes betrayed her, he felt, surely her taste was intended to attract attention. Although not classically beautiful -- "I have the kind of beauty," she had once told him, "that other women love to see because it is so easily discounted under close scrutiny." -- she was certainly striking with her height and all that silvery gold hair. Years before, she was offered the opportunity to be a prominent model for an interplanetically famous designer of women's fashions, but, he recalled, she had laughed and turned it down. He watched her before the mirror, hair unpinned as she brushed it out to its full length. She stood in suede boots that were nearly hip-high, attached to her belt by a gartered affair with shiny buckles. The bodysuit was black with long sleeves and a high neck, and the forest green suede stood out against it. It had occurred to him more than once that he had no idea how she functioned as well as she did as an agent -- surely just her appearance would make her conspicuous. The answer was in the fact that she was a very good agent, one of their best, and she knew it.

"Chantal, I want you to start this conversation over again, very slowly."

She seemed to be smiling. "You know, I've heard that several times since I've been aboard that starship."

"Chantal ..."

She sighed visibly. "I know, I'm making light of it -- it's easier to live with that way, but now there isn't time for niceties. It may be that I had a great deal to do with Joanna McCoy's suicide. I don't know, I may never know for sure, but on the chance that I may have, I have to do something about McCoy."

"Your career could be abruptly shortened if you continue to display such mawkish sentimentality, my dear."

"Let me be the one to worry about that. I've already asked Kirk to let him stay on Babel while I'm here and he's agreed. Right now he'll do very nearly anything to help his friend because time is running out. He has to be released into a doctor's care. That must be arranged immediately because the ship will leave orbit within the hour. Once that's settled, I want a psychotech to see him."

"If you break your cover ..."

"If it's handled right he'll never know. We have the best people for the job, you know that. I've seen them put agents back together who were in more dire need than McCoy is. It's certainly worth a try. At this point it can't do any harm."

"You've forgotten one very important, albeit small, detail."

"I'll handle Todmeister."

"Really?" His face expressed both irony and humor. "What makes you think he'll agree to be handled?"

"Paul, please ... there isn't time to stand here debating this with you. I've got to contact the ship and have a doctor standing by for appearances' sake. Will you help me or will you not?"

"I will, but only to see how you're going to handle it from there. You know it, Chantal: 'our captain didn't name himself.'"

"I think you're enjoying this."

"Oh, I will, you can be sure of that, and I'm entitled."

"So am I, and that's why Todmeister will agree. Let's get started, we've only fifteen minutes. You know the impossible is easy, it's the improbable that's going to take some time."

"I knew you'd see it my way."

Duties for appearances' sake completed, Chantal persuaded Caidan to take lunch at Der Goldene Topf. She wanted a quiet place to talk and an opportunity to indulge in her favorite rare wine, Asti Spumante. The place was a particular favorite and she was a well-received patroness.

"Thank you," she said, touching Paul Caidan's hand lightly from across the low table.

"I'm unaccustomed to gratitude from you, my dear." He sipped from his glass, thinking she had incredibly bad taste in champagne. "No doubt I improve in your eyes when compared to Kirk. I daresay he seemed a mite ... ill-humored, shall we say?"

Chantal thought back, mercifully briefly, to the few sentences she had exchanged with Kirk when McCoy was beamed down.

"Is he always like that?" Caidan pursued. "If so, I don't know where these rumors about his charm come from."

She shook her head. "We had ... words ... prior to my leaving."

"Dare I ask about what?"

"Cabbages and Kings," she tossed out lightly, "and very short life expectancies."

"I'm sorry I asked. But you're welcome. You realize of course that the rest is up to you."

"What did you tell Steel?" she asked, referring to the Diplomatic Corps staff doctor who was tentatively in charge of McCoy.

"Simply what you said: that he was here for a rest after a grave emotional blow. He exchanged a few words with the doctor aboard the ship about the medication and that seemed to be sufficient. McCoy was taken to the hospital facilities and I left orders to have him returned to the suite adjoining yours." He paused. "What did you think I'd have to tell him?"

She shrugged. "I didn't know. After all, you know where all the bodies are buried."

He smiled. "Oh, no, all the skulduggery here will be yours alone. I'm truly looking forward to seeing just exactly how you're going to handle Todmeister."

Her look turned disdainful. "Paul, I'm not a neophyte. I no longer quake at the mere mention of his name. But you are right, and I'm looking forward to seeing what I'm going to tell him, too. Is he in a good mood?"

Caidan laughed. "He had a good mood once, about seventeen years ago, if I remember correctly. He might even have smiled."

"I understand."

"But he is looking forward to your complete report."

"'Tis pity we can't trade services. How many of the psychotechs are on duty here now?"

"We've had a bad season -- another reason I hope your report has something he'll like to hear. We lost Renoir last month."

She wouldn't ask how -- she felt, absurdly, that it would bring bad luck. She performed the mental equivalent of crossing her fingers in the hopes that the man she wanted would be available. "We have ... had ... five. The others?"

"Spival and T'Fava are in the field retrieving agents. Dardanius is here but he's locked in with Thiel. He came back from Leesahn -- the second time on that assignment -- he's in bad shape --" His voice broke off. "Dardanius is working in depth."

Chantal remembered Thiel, because she was the agent who brought him back from the field. When she finally found him, he was totally mindless, walking the streets of Leesahn. It was after that incident with him that finding the Man became her priority alone. She hadn't totally succeeded, but she was still functional. "And Burns?" she asked hopefully.

"He's here, on sufferance as usual."

"That has always seemed vaguely ridiculous. He's more idiosyncratic than the rest of us but Todmeister knows the company needs him. He's the best."

"And certain of it. You want him?"

"I need the best for McCoy."

"I thought you didn't like Burns."

Chantal postponed dwelling upon her relationship with Brandon Burns, the chief of the PsychoTechnical Department, until later, when she'd be obliged to. His image came quickly unbidden to her mind's eye -- average height for an Alpha Centaurian, of a stature not unlike Kirk, but with black hair and the most startlingly blue eyes she'd ever seen. Not likely to see his 50th birthday again, he was a widower, a veteran of space service, and a periodic alcoholic which was why he was already discharged from the staffs of three psychiatric institutions. But he was one of the best in his field -- Chantal thought that made perfect sense in light of life's perpetual irony -- perhaps the best, and Caidan had recruited him about the same time he did her. Burns demanded a phenomenal salary, and got it, perhaps even to his own surprise. He proved to be worth it, even when he wasn't completely sober.

"It's not me he'll be treating," she said, suddenly remembering Caidan's presence. "I need the best."

"I'm sure flattery will get you everywhere with him so keep that tone. You'll need it. Even if Todmeister agrees, he can't order Brandy Burns to do it."

"Well," she sighed, and finished the very old Italian champagne in her glass, "I know where some of the bodies are myself. Are we late yet?"

"About five minutes."

"Plus the fifteen it'll take to get there," she began to compute aloud. "That's sufficient." She pushed herself up from the floor cushions while Caidan settled the bill.

"You're the only one I know," he said, taking her arm as they left, "who'd purposely keep the Deathmaster waiting."

The Corporate Towers were the location of all the businesses that had offices in the Babel complex. Although many companies throughout the Federation would have wished the prestige of being located there, few could afford it. Chantal, three steps ahead of Caidan, her boot heels clicking against the polished floor, pushed through the faceted glass doors -- she wondered how many people realized they were leaded crystal -- that were branded Feuerjuwelen (Deschränkte Haftung Gesellschaft).

She knew only a partial history of Firejewels Ltd. and felt it was probably just as well. It was an actual business. In his own circles, whatever they might be, she knew Todmeister was a greatly respected owner and dealer of rare gems with a far-flung reputation in their galaxy. The various facilities of the company, from offices to foundries, were equally as well dispersed. Employees were known to travel a great deal, and, often carrying jewels or large amounts of currency, were licensed to carry weapons as protection. Chantal was such an employee.

She stopped before the desk-cum-console within the first office, casually remembering that the mural behind the attendant was also a 2-way mirror and that even as she paused a laser was aimed at her. The female at the desk handled the innocuous controls with perfect calm and Chantal knew the bland receptionist was as competent in her capacity as she was in her own.

"Miss Caberfae," the deceptively vacuous looking woman smiled up at her, "welcome back. We hope your trip was successful and that you'll be with us for awhile." She looked past Chantal at Caidan. "Commodore, Mr. Todmeister is expecting you as well."

Chantal maintained a poised smile. She knew that, even as the woman chatted, the controls she manipulated were verifying her identity and checking her for weapons. She wondered where the receptionists came from. Were they agents like herself, or those who didn't make Alpha grade, or did they really think they were working for a master jeweler? It didn't matter, they were efficient. After further handling the console before her, she returned her gaze to Chantal.

"You may go in now."

The Capellan walked to the door marked Private and waited for Caidan to step ahead of her to open it. She was unaccustomed to social niceties -- like colloquialisms, from world to world they varied and were difficult to keep track of. The door locked behind them after they stepped into the ante room where Chantal knew there would be one final security check before they entered Todmeister's office. She let her hands fall to her sides, as did Commodore Caidan, and held her breath, prepared for the brainwave scan to sweep her. As it passed she shuddered involuntarily, then approached the second door which would now open.

Gerhart Griffon Todmeister sat behind a desk of imported Salician marble and seemed to barely acknowledge the presence of his visitors. Chantal's eyes swept the room, quite ordinary looking for an import/export jeweler's office, and noted that nothing had changed since the last time she'd been there. Indeed, nothing had changed since the first time, not even Todmeister himself. Taller than she, he was, with dark, neatly styled hair, deepset dark eyes in a clean-shaven face, and a leanly muscular frame. She didn't know his age, he appeared to never grow older, not even touches of grey in his hair. Cool, competently in charge -- contained ferocity -- that was Todmeister. A shrewd businessman who was rich many times over because he ran the most successful gem business in the Federation. The man who ran the O.S.S., who had his hand on the pulse of intelligence, counterintelligence, subterfuge -- espionage -- everything the Federation regretfully admitted they couldn't function without, who guided the lives of his many minions like Chantal directly and those unlike her indirectly, who could order everything in his field from infiltration to assassination, if he deemed it necessary for the Federation's survival -- that too was Todmeister. He was Chantal's superior of long standing, the man on whose order she had killed, and would die if need be. Her thoughts ebbed to a lighter vein as she mused that some people truly believed agents such as herself and agencies like theirs existed only in fiction anymore. Perhaps they were better off believing that.

Chantal walked briskly to his desk, noting the plush carpet that muffled the sound of her boots. The presence of the Chief of Operations no longer intimidated her the way it once did. Todmeister glanced up from the viewscreen that had until then held his attention. She rendered a serene smile, watched Caidan take a chair, then elected to sit on the edge of his desk.

"Sorry we're late, sir," she said.

"Twenty-six minutes. You're slipping. Last time it was twenty-nine."

"I'll try to improve, sir." That's done, she thought. It was an old bit of business, a result of the day when she had gained enough stature to pick and choose her own assignments and refuse what she didn't want. Since that time they often sparred over things she felt were truly trivial, such as his obsession with punctuality. She knew though that she would never disobey an order involving duty.

Todmeister programmed the viewer to bring forth what she recognized to be the official report of the Joanna McCoy incident. At the sight of it she felt suddenly charged with an energy she'd so far forced herself to contain.

"Your report being necessarily censored," he began, "it left a great deal to be desired. I assume you can substantiate the claims you've made."

She reached across the desk and programmed the wall projection unit to render a map of the necessary portion of known space. "We've long known the Target to be based in Quadrant 4 since we know for certain he has large land holdings on Yemen and Leesahn. He eluded us 7 years ago on Yemen. I maintain he's returned to that base of operations. I'm certain he's back at the Dragon Chateau."

"You were certain 7 years ago and we lost him just the same."

"Sir, I'm not responsible for the organization -- only for my own actions. You will remember at the time he was protected by your no-kill warrant. And had I been allowed to act on my own without the aid of bungling --"

"Righteous indignation and hindsight will serve little purpose now."

"He's there ... I know he's back."

"How?"

"I know him better than any one of us. I've studied him, it bears his mark. You know how many incidents there have been in this quadrant. Starfleet is only too happy to credit them to the Klingons because they can explain that to the populace."

"Tell me about Miss McCoy."

Chantal took a deep breath. "It has all the earmarks. She was set up. The *Enterprise* has had trouble on Yemen before, but this was too pat."

"Coincidence has been known to be fastidious."

"His people were involved. The girl had been in the company of Servagni." She paused to watch Todmeister's expression change -- she knew he was pleased. "She was under the influence of drugs, or mind-tampering, or both. I don't know and it's nearly irrelevant how, the fact remains she was. He wanted an incident that would be difficult to gloss over and he very nearly had it. A Starfleet officer beds his own daughter, who is disguised as a prostitute, who then takes her own life. Even without publicity Starfleet would take a dim view and hopefully -- I postulate -- close Yemen as a port."

Todmeister elevated an eyebrow and looked at Caidan who was sitting customarily indulgent and just slightly amused by Chantal's fervor through the exchange. Chantal looked first at one, then the other, then turned her attention to the buckle on the ankle of her boot. She knew the gambit well enough, he was asking Caidan to play devil's advocate.

"I can't help but agree with him, my dear," the Commodore said. "It's entirely too neat."

"Of course it is," she nodded, "but it's him just the same. Four months before her death she was a nurse on one of the Cygnet colonies. Then she met Servagni and his companions."

"You're sure it was Servagni?" Caidan asked.

"Although she herself didn't remember, I have witnesses on Yemen who state she spent much time with him. She met him and his companions and somehow they enticed her to leave Cygnet with them under an assumed identity. She worked in the Chateau so the Man had easy access to her. By whatever means she was programmed and waiting for McCoy."

"You think then that it was intentional, that she was readied for McCoy, not for just anyone they might choose."

"I have no proof but I know how the Man thinks. Perhaps it amused him. After all, your Terran societies still retain the archaic taboos about incest."

"How could he be sure they'd meet the way he wanted them to? He had only the girl in his control, presumably."

"A very good question," Chantal said, leaving the desk and stepping between Caidan and the other man. "You sent us to Yemen," she told Caidan, "or at least arranged for it. How do you think they were certain?"

Caidan smiled. "Checkmate, Chantal, but I never expected the results we got. Now I know for certain we have a double agent on our hands."

"We know more than that." Chantal paced the length of a particular design on the carpet, glancing slightly at Todmeister who didn't seem impressed. "What else could it be?" she paused, facing the man behind the desk.

"Chantal, you must admit it's somewhat outre. He sends his most important people to Cygnet to find the girl, lure her to Yemen, and hope that sooner or later the ship her father is aboard will stop there. He couldn't know the Commodore would arrange it until he did."



She almost shrugged. In the cold light of reality she had to admit that it would sound contrived but the Man didn't work with cold reality. He was shadows and half truths, and Chantal knew, felt in the very marrow of her bones, that he was behind it all. "I grant you we can't go to trial with it, but we have moved with less pat evidence. Servagni took the girl to Yemen and brought her to the Chateau. She was programmed, somehow. It would have been equally effective to create an incident involving some other Fleet personnel, but when they learned her own father would be there they used that. But something goes wrong. She doesn't die, but she has no memory of anything. Even when I told her she had only my word for it."

"One thing puzzles me," Caidan interrupted. "Why McCoy and his daughter?"

"She would be easy to program. Years of having an absentee father whom she both adored and hated gave her a frame of mind that would most likely enhance the programming. Although she loved her father she also wanted revenge. It would all be appropriately lurid -- the final vendetta of a neglected daughter."

"But enough to close Yemen as a port?"

"Perhaps not by itself," she finally shrugged, "but one more step, and a large one since the *Enterprise* had trouble there before. Everyone informed of planetary politics knows the new Council on Yemen is obsessed with maintaining a spotless record. It took enormous efforts to persuade the people that the old form of governing giving the Prefect power even over the Council was becoming dangerously ineffective as Yemen grew in popularity as a port. They'd rather close the port than lose their Council seats. We all know that it would suite our Target admirably to see no more Starfleet personnel there. That too convinces me he's returned, the timing is too perfect for him to have arranged it off planet. He's returned, and he's at the Chateau."

Caidan touched her hand. "Settle down, my dear. You don't know that." Something twinged inside him. He didn't like Kirk, or the *Enterprise* assignment, but he'd rather have her there than in the Chateau again.

"Well, I'm sorry I didn't have time to get photographs." Defeated and angry she stalked to the center of the room again. "It's very easy for the two of you to sit here and direct me in the field. I do my job, I follow orders." She felt herself shaking inside and clenched her fists -- *this is stupid*, she told herself, *you're just tired, there's no reason to cry, you will not cry* -- Caidan would laugh. *They have to be thorough, they have to pick the story apart to look for flaws in the reasoning. But I know there are none, not this time. Dammit, I know him. I know how he operates.* "But do not tell me about Yang," she continued, slowly and deliberately, "not when it is I who knows him better than anyone." Embarrassed, the six-fingered hand brushed her hair from her face and she looked to Caidan. As steadily as her nerves allowed, she sat in the chair next to his, crossing her suede-clad legs.

"I believe you," Todmeister said after what seemed like an eternity to the woman.

Chantal felt her shoulders sag with relief. "Of course," she said simply. She shifted in the chair, then approached the desk, knowing he would never tell her the job was well-done because he expected it to be. "Further orders, sir?"

"You'll pursue the standard debriefing procedures." He reprogrammed his desk viewer. "At your convenience while you're here you'll also brief the other Alpha agents on call." He paused to check the viewer. "You're overdue for psychosimulator check-up and your target scores are out of date. You'll rectify all of this before you leave."

Color flared in her cheeks as she looked to Caidan -- Todmeister had to be jesting.

The Commodore smiled. "Now you know why you're to be here two weeks."

She closed her mouth tightly, not wanting her rage to spill out -- nor the fact that her last target scores were fraudulent, logged by a friend for a practice she never had. Chantal had anticipated losing the two weeks but not so trivially. Her marksmanship was superior to both of theirs. But she didn't dare complain when she wanted a favor. "Will that be all, sir?"

"For now, yes. Sometime during your stay be sure to see the projectionist as well."

Damn him, he's talking to me as though I just came on the job. Having the projectionist bring her up to date was standard operating procedure -- why was he doing this to her? She swallowed hard. "Yes, sir." She nodded curtly and left.

The two men watched the golden Amazon depart, then began to confer with each other.

Chantal poured another glass of cifo and carried it into the bedroom. The shower had been refreshing -- she much preferred real water to vibrason cabinets -- and she had just finished plaiting her still-damp hair in two long tails. Her body felt better but the inner hurt lingered. Nude, glass in hand, she began to poke through the closet where someone, come and gone like faeries, had hung her clothes.

Damn both of them, she thought. *But why?* She was over-reacting and she knew it. They were no harder on her than usual, not really. *Something's happening to me*, she thought. *I'm getting soft. When this stint is over maybe I'll work here in the complex for awhile, with other agents. I've been with civilians too long, I'm getting as hypersensitive as they are.* She felt tears welling in her eyes just the same and rubbed them

away angrily. *This is so foolish*, she told herself. She set the glass on the bureau and sat on the edge of the bed, her head in her hands.

I've got to pull myself together, if I go on psychosimulator like this I'll be reassigned to Records when it's over. And Brandy Burns will be the one to put me there. Somehow being the real Security Chief of the *Enterprise* looked more appealing than ever but she knew they could take that, too. But surely Kirk would try to stop her transfer ... no, why should he? He wouldn't defend her, no one ever had, no one ever would, and like she always had, she would take care of herself.

She would also take care of her mistakes, she decided, and faced the closet again. The one to rectify now was for McCoy. So angry over the treatment she had received, she refused to ask Todmeister. She'd go to Burns and settle it with him personally. Somehow. She took the jumpsuit deep blue Soochen silk, belled sleeves and legs, and a neckline that V-ed to her waist -- from the closet and stepped into it. Looking into the mirror she elected to undo her hair, scowling at the wave the braiding had left, and ran a hasty brush through it. Realizing she was barefoot she immediately bent to look under the bed, the most obvious place for her shoes to be, until she remembered the closet faerie. Slipping her feet into her shoes she finished the drink and left.

The Third Tower -- most practically named that because the Corporate ones were dual -- housed all those employed in the various businesses based in the Babel complex. 112 stories, a dozen of them underground, were occupied by the various beings who worked for the wealthiest companies in the Federation. Brandon Burns lived there, too, on sublevel one.

Having been there before, Chantal made her way easily to Burns' apartment, marvelling once again over the way the appearance did not change as you went sublevel. But the best paid employees could afford such luxuries. Burns lived in the single occupants' section, she remembered as she approached the door.

She pressed the silent buzzer and leaned toward the intercom. No sound came so she pressed the button again and spoke into the grill. "Brandon -- it's Chantal, Chantal Caberfae." She heard the lock snap open and put her hand to the doorknob which yielded. She stepped inside.

Closing the door behind her she paused to let her eyes adjust to the light, or rather the lack of it. He hated bright lights, in fact nearly all light -- it bothered his eyes, he claimed -- and happily ignored the intramural fixtures' illumination for that of candle light. Dozens of candles in colored glass containers twinkled and blinked before her, casting dancing shadows on the walls which were covered with rare books. The money he didn't squander he spent on his passion, real printed volumes.

Before crossing the room she fought to recall the floor plan -- parlor, kitchette, office, bedroom two by two, side by side. She looked then to the far side of the room, to the fabricated fireplace and the enormous, old fashioned easychair before it, the back of which was to her.

"Brandon?" she ventured softly as she walked toward the chair.

"Chantal was a girl whose frigidity approached cataleptic rigidity ..."

The voice was unmistakeable -- the accent, the inflections -- the rhyme. *Mother of All, he's drunk*, she sighed. *I'll never be able to reason with him.* Then again, he frequently was even more rational in that state than when he was sober.

"Brandon," she paused at the side of the chair as he looked up at her. She wouldn't try to remember the years since she's seen the face that turned to her -- it had been some time -- but it hadn't changed.

Lined and weathered, the truest blue eyes under heavy brows, Brandon Burns smiled at her. "Shall I finish?"

"Can we talk?" she asked, already nervous.

"Will you have a drink?"

"I will -- if you won't."

He bolted upright and filled two glasses. "You can't make me drunk on a cup of wine and a bit of slaughter. Thiel is dead."

"I'm sorry. I know you liked him."

"Whatever gave you that idea?" He smiled almost sardonically and held the glass to her. "I certified him fit when he left."

"So he was fit, when he left."

"Perhaps." He shrugged. "What do you want, girl?"

"I need a favor."

He was thoughtful for a moment, then: "If you really are dying to know,
just how far this young lady would go,
come on Tuesday night
when the price is just right,
She's on stage at the Dragon Chateau."

"Brandon, please --" She felt the trembling within begin to swell.

"You still owe me, girl, for the last time."

"I do not." It wasn't true but she was indignant.

"A Capellan girl not too fastidious
took unseemly delight in --"

"Brandy, stop!" Her shriek surprised even her.

"I wondered how long it would take you to call me that." He stepped closer to her. "Melting yet, ice maiden?"

No more today, she thought, I can bear no more. She looked at him, then dove for the sanctuary his chair offered. She folded her arms tightly about herself to ward off a chill only she felt, while Brandon Burns passed before her to the side table and poured another drink, eyeing her steadily.

He was only partially sorry for upsetting her, but she knew better than to take him by surprise, especially when asking for a service. Not a word from her in years, and she ignored all of his, yet she still had the nerve to come gliding in like a day hadn't passed, or like those days never had.

Her mind told her to play for time but Chantal didn't feel she had any left. She foolishly misjudged him and now she would pay as only he could make her because only he knew. Seven years before, the last time she worked in the Dragon Chateau and the second time she'd been there undercover. She had even been pleased when the assignment came, she wanted one more chance at the Target she missed the first time. Working as one of the Chateau's "hostesses" was not her favorite cover identity but it was part of the job and so she closed her eyes and fought to block out all the things done to her and all of the things who did them.

That mission was unsuccessful. Closer to the Man than ever before, he still eluded her. She returned to Babel, to the agency, outwardly none the worse for wear but inwardly shaking. As usual, she underwent screening with the psychosimulator, a prerequisite upon returning from an assignment. All agents were submitted to it in order to verify that they were able to face their next job.

Just as he had for all the years she'd been there, Brandon Burns conducted the screening. To say she failed miserably expressed it mildly. From the regressive memory scan he learned why -- he learned everything. His report could've had her reassigned to the library files -- if he had made it. Instead he certified her capable and offered to treat her without recording the necessity to do so, for an unnamed payment to be delivered upon completion. She accepted in desperation, she wanted field work again and this was the only way. He never mentioned the payment and she never offered. Before the treatment was completed she had her new assignment and since she had been certified all that remained was telling him. She couldn't face him, and hadn't faced him since, ignoring all his messages and sighing with relief when they finally stopped. Caidan knew her the way she wanted him to but Brandy knew everything.

It was foolish to have expected cooperation from him, and she realized that lately she'd been reacting foolishly in a variety of ways. She looked up and saw him watching her over the rim of his glass.

"What's the matter, girl? Did I scare you?" he asked.

She hesitated to answer. No one fenced verbally the way he did and this time she'd have to at least match him, she couldn't outwit him. "No, Brandy, you didn't." She rose from the chair and started to walk away. "I'm sorry I disturbed you." She continued to the door.

"Then why did you?"

"I need help, something only you can do."

"I know, you'll be on psychosimulator before you leave."

She shook her head. "No, not that. I have a friend who needs help."

"That's amazing."

"What is? That I have a friend or that he needs help?"

"That you care," he said, "but now that you mention it one guarantees the other."

She put her hand to the doorknob. "I will not beg you, Brandy."

"What is it? Be brief, I haven't all night."

"My friend -- his daughter died -- he was involved indirectly --"

"Were you?"

"Yes."

"Go on."

"He can't get past it and Starfleet will put him planetside, or worse, if he isn't helped soon."

"What is it you want from me?"

"Help him to live with the fact that life must go on even when we wish it wouldn't."

He looked at her thoughtfully then beckoned her to come closer. As she did he filled the second glass and held it to her.

"Where is he now?"

"Here, the Diplomatic Corps hospital has him in care."

"How long have I got?"

"Just under two weeks."

He exhaled audibly. "Not very much time for a miracle. What about the man upstairs? You've cleared it with him?"

She shook her head solemnly.

"I'd have been disappointed if you had. I'll start tomorrow."

"Then you'll do it?"

"Aye, that I will. But it'll cost you."

"What?" she asked barely above a whisper.

He chuckled and smiled. "I won't know until it's done. Two weeks, you say?"

She nodded. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me; I'm not doing it for you. The poor bastard needs all the help he can get if he's a friend of yours."

"I know I'm not functioning at peak," McCoy said with the barest hint of a smile, "but I'm not so far gone that I don't wonder what's going on, Chantal."

She smiled meekly, busying herself with the tray of food she had just placed on the table. She had arranged to have breakfast sent to McCoy's suite so she could serve it to him, along with some version of the news about Burns. While McCoy was dressing she arranged the table in the sitting room with dishes and silver, straightened the cushions on the chairs, and adjusted the lighting. A prefatory search of the room revealed the hiding place of the monitoring devices. She placed a miniature jamming device in the audio receiver and before making the camera defunct performed a manual gesture before it that she was sure the Terran on the receiving end would recognize. After all, she told herself, she did tell them she wanted it disconnected. No doubt the order was still clearing red tape but that wasn't her problem.

"Going on? Right now, breakfast. I hope you will like what I ordered. I gauged the Terran food largely from hearsay." She lifted the cover from one of the plates. "I'll never understand how you can eat the unborn children of the hen."

McCoy looked at the steaming platter of scrambled eggs, then at the woman. "I never really thought it was an acquired taste. Why don't you try some?"

She crinkled up her nose and shook her head. "Definitely not. Now this I'm told you will especially fancy." Another cover raised revealed a platter of bacon, the aroma of which wafted through the air. "It's real, not soy-synthesized."

Other unveilings exposed hot buttered toast, hash brown potatoes, and a large pitcher of cold fruit juice. She then put a plate before her own place and took her chair.

"At this point, if we were aboard the *Enterprise*," McCoy remembered, "Spock would now completely ruin my appetite by sitting opposite me with a large bowl of something that looked and smelled like kelp."

"Would you like me to serve you?" she asked.

"I think I can manage."

Chantal watched him spoon the eggs onto his plate sparingly. "Actually, I've never tasted kelp, but I'd like to." She took the cover from her own platter. "I eat only broiled lean meat," she continued, gesturing with knife and fork to the filet on her plate, "some sea foods -- shellfish, you call them. And ... greens? Well, nearly all vegetables. Through my travels I have found that my metabolism requires very little adjustment to native foods when I adhere to that diet." She prodded the salad with her fork. "My great weakness however is cheese. I've had hypersensitivity poisoning four times but I'm afraid I never learn. I simply can't resist sampling a new cheese."

"That's a coincidence," the man said. "Jim's the same way."

Chantal was momentarily surprised but let it pass. McCoy was her main concern at present. He sampled his food dutifully but didn't display the interest she had hoped for, and she seriously doubted that through the stomach was the way to anything but a man's appetite. Since he wouldn't speak unless she initiated conversation, she decided on one last try. "May I?" she asked, reaching across the table to the plate of bacon. "It smells delicious."

"Be my guest." He watched her take a tentative nibble. "As I think about it, it's not unlike Capellan zhadkiir."

She nodded. "Very much so. Now that I like, but the eggs ..."

"Eggs," he corrected.

"Whatever they are, they look terrible, and their scent is not a recommendation either."

"Chantal, you're evading." McCoy looked at her levelly.

"Only a little," she demured.

"Have you and the Captain been plotting?"

She was silent while her mind did a cartwheel. On Babel the only one she called Captain was Todmeister, but obviously McCoy meant Kirk. "I think it's very obvious. I thought you would like a vacation. I'm sorry I didn't have the time to talk with you and tell you personally but I had a great deal of work to do before we reached Babel so I did ask the Captain to arrange it with you."

"You're very sweet," he said quietly. "Why?"

She toyed with the water glass. "Let's just say I don't support the notion that suffering is good for the soul. And most of the time hindsight is good for nothing at all. Guilt is non-productive, Doctor."

"What do you know about guilt, Chantal?" His face showed the emotion his voice refused to reveal.

She folded her arms and looked at her ring. *More than I could ever tell you*, she thought. "I know what it does to people." Chantal pushed her chair from the table and stood up. "The Arcturians are having a cultural exhibit in the Free Worlds pavillion. Would you like to take me to see it?"

"I'm afraid I wouldn't be very good company."

"A friend of mine told me yesterday that their medical display is immensely interesting. He ought to know; he's a doctor. I mentioned that I was in the company of a doctor while I'm here and he highly recommended it."

"Chantal ..."

"Doctor, let's get something straight, as they say. I didn't bring you here to stay locked in this apartment. You could sulk on the ship. I fully intend to tow you if need be all over Babel in the next two weeks so you had better start liking the idea." She felt nervous, rattled. She had known he would be uncooperative and hadn't given a great deal of thought to precisely how she would handle him. As she walked away from the table, she heard him behind her.

"Why are you trying to help me?" he asked. He touched her arm and she turned to face him. "You scarcely know me. Why do you care?"

Chantal looked at him intently, feeling as though she'd never really looked at him before. McCoy was shorter than her, his frame slimmer than she had realized, and his blue eyes -- *do all doctors have blue eyes?* seemed to plead. He was sadness personified, with the tremendous soulfulness of a man past his youth who reached at life and drew back an empty hand.

"I've never seen father-love before," she said, surprising herself with her honesty. "I was never close enough to it to experience it. Joanna couldn't understand that even though you were not there, you cherished her as one does a special treasure."

McCoy's eyes widened.

"You didn't expect me to say that, did you? You think I'm like Spock."

"You have to admit, there are some similarities."

"There are in you, too, Doctor. Like Spock you're tremendously stubborn."

His expression sullen.

"Now don't do that," she snapped. "Tell me the truth. Do you want to spend the rest of your days mourning her? What is mourning but basking in the drama of grief? Or do you want to live with it? There are only two choices and one will take a great deal of work. There's no honor in surrender, Doctor. It's the easiest thing in the world because it's totally self-serving."

"Have you ever lost, Chantal?"

"I cannot totally empathize, no. I have never lost a child."

"Then how can you condemn?"

"You are a doctor; you can take life as well as give it. Since you are alive now you obviously prefer any form of life to its alternative. The object of life is to live it. Joanna died because she lost sight of that somewhere. Don't you owe her this showing that you have learned it?"

"You don't understand," he said simply, defeatedly.

"Yes, I do. I understand that I could have let go of reality a dozen times and surrendered, but I didn't. Wanting to be alive always kept me going even when I was alone," she smiled gently, "and had no one to ... raise hell? ... at me. Now are you coming with me?"

"Perhaps for a little while."

"Marvelous. I want you to meet my friend, the doctor I told you about. His name is Brandon Burns."

"Brandy, are you certain it'll work? Chantal sat cross-legged on the bench in his office, watching Brandon Burns sort through a container of tape cartridges.

"I'm not god, girl; I'm not certain of anything. I can tell you the odds are favorable. Subfascination isn't new."

"We ... you ... don't use it very often."

He nodded. "Only on our employees. After all, girl, it's rather benevolent. It wouldn't do for us to be kind to the Opposition."

"Brainwashing is brainwashing, Brandy."

"Not really. We use IPCRESS* in one form or another in almost every instance. You can't force truth out of or lies into someone who has no fear. But obviously the point in this case is to remove fear, not place it."

"And how will you do that? I'm an Alpha agent, I work in the field, I don't know all of our deep dark secrets."

"It's very simple, really, and over 300 years old. Subliminal light frequencies are projected that affect the brain through the optic nerve and reinforce the effect of what is being seen or heard. Combined with sound on the same level, it's very effective. Chantal, don't you remember?"

"Perhaps it wasn't that effective," she quipped, forcing the memory away.

"If you don't then it was exceptionally so. We don't want a memory, really. For your friend, we have no film. I'll have to project the light itself and then create a hypnotic state to work in."

"Wouldn't hypnosis alone be sufficient?"

"I don't think so, not in this case. Pure hypnosis is often useless -- you simply cannot force people to go against their grain, and certainly not indefinitely if you do manage to bend them. It's rather fascinating to realize that in over 500 years no one has ever improved pure hypnosis."

"How will you project the light?"

"Not having a film to imprint an idea on him, that's going to be your problem. We could always tell him we have one of you at one of your old jobs."

"Brandy!" She was startled. He had lulled her into a sense of false security with his prolonged politeness.

*IPCRESS: Induction of Psychoneuroses by Conditioned Reflex with Stress

"You're a clever girl; you'll think of something. Just get him to watch the light, that's all."

"How can we be in the same room and not be effected?"

"It'll be geared to him especially. I have the results of some tests they did in the Diplomatic Corps hospital. It's very timely of you to come to me when you did. Fleet's got word that he's here and so the medicos in the DC are watching him. If he doesn't improve Kirk will be ordered to put him off at a starbase for relocation and treatment."

"For certain, Brandy?"

"Aye."

Her entire being sighed. There was even less margin for failure than she had anticipated. "How long will this take?"

"I can't say until the first session. It'll depend on how suggestable he is naturally. It could take as long as several sessions."

"We can't use the same story repeatedly as a lure."

"We won't have to. I can implant a posthypnotic suggestion strong enough to make him cooperative on cue thereafter."

"It all sounds so dire." She came to her feet and paced to his desk.

Burns looked at the profile she presented -- the high forehead, perhaps too much nose, the determined chin. Her hair was swept away from her face and caught in an ornate clasp, with wispy tendrils curling at her cheeks and temples. She would be 28 standard years this year, he remembered. Her life, oddly enough, allowed her to age more gracefully than if she had stayed on her own world. But for what it gave, she had paid a high price. She was gold, and ice. She wasn't dilithium, she was titanium, and she always had been.

Well, almost always. He didn't love her -- you couldn't allow yourself to love an endangered species. The pain of the approaching inevitability would be too great. "Direness is relative," he said finally. "Everything is dire."

"Everything is relative. Why can't you use T.A.P.?"

"Too risky. Tricayandamino-propen alters the brain's nerve cells and the cells of the membrane that sheaths those cells -- that effect is what increases the subject's suggestibility. It would work, but it would take longer and if in the meantime the DC take any test samples, it'll show in his system. Then everyone would start asking a lot of questions, and the man upstairs would know exactly who to come to for answers. My department should be the only one on Babel stocking it. Subfascination is the best ... it's literally all in the mind."

She folded her arms, not caring that she might wrinkle the velvet of her suit. "All right, so we use subliminal with light and sound. Then what, exactly?"

"You'd best prepare a little speech of whatever it is you want him to think, or rethink. Once I've set the stage it'll be up to you. The suggestions should come in your voice, his subconscious will relate to it positively -- won't it?"

"I think so," she hesitated, "but I cannot be certain."

He closed the box and settled back into his chair, propping booted feet on the desk. "We'll have to assume so. You tell him what it is you want. Sooner, or later, he'll believe it. For a long time."

"Are you certain?" She observed the consternation on his face. "I know, I know, but Brandy it has to work."

"How long have you been an agent, Chantal?"

"Longer than I'd care to admit sometimes."

"And for the latter half of that time, give or take a couple of years, you've functioned after subfascination. As the doctor of the nonexistent record I can state that you would not have functioned without it." He cleared his throat. "Although it's true you're not a classic example since we didn't complete the treatment to my satisfaction."

"I'm well enough, Brandy. And I was under the assumption we'd declared a truce."

"We did? I've no recollection, Chantal."

"Brandy, you've got to remember, when we're with him, not a word about ..."

He grinned, enjoying her discomfort. "God, don't tell me you're playing the vestal virgin for these starship people."

"I'm not playing anything; I am their Chief of Security. My cover has to remain intact."

"Well, then, Alpha 2, you'd best brief me ... what part am I playing in this slice of life?"

"I told him you were a friend of mine, and a colleague of his. Talk shop, he's an expert on crew psychology and whatnot. But tread lightly. You'll meet us at the Arcturian exhibition this afternoon. Praise the medical displays lavishly, if you will."

"Must I? You know I abhor them."

"Brandy, why must you make this difficult? You didn't have to agree."

"No, I did not. You'd do well to remember that, girl."

"The price, Brandon," she reminded, feeling herself shudder.

He smiled and shook his head. "Not until it's done, girl. Not a moment before."

"Well, I'd really like to settle it now," she said airily. "There'll be so little time ..."

"Don't run out on me again, Chantal. I'm warning you, don't do it."

As there were several minutes remaining before McCoy would call for her, Chantal busied herself arranging her hair. *This is absurd*, she said to herself, scowling into the mirror, *as long as I've been here I've done little besides sigh, shudder, pin, and unpin my hair. I never worry about my hair, at least I never did, I never cared, I'm not the vain type.* She leaned forward towards the mirror and examined her eyes with close scrutiny, noting minute lines at their corners. *In five more years I'll need surgical rejuvenation if this continues. And considering the way I've been talking to myself lately, I'll be fortunate indeed to last that long.*

Her plans were made, as casually as possible in order to allow them to flow naturally. After they toured the pavillion she would invite them back to her suite for a quiet drink and talk. McCoy would be reluctant to socialize intimately with a stranger but she would ignore that. Once there Burns would suggest viewing one of the available films digressing on some topic from the display ... and she fervently hoped he would not have one of the films the agency did indeed have on record of her work at the Dragon Chateau. Something would seem to go wrong with the viewing apparatus and she would replace the film with the light source cartridge; then Burns would go to work. When McCoy was ready, she would perform her ritual. She would review the entire incident with Joanna emphasizing repeatedly how he was a victim of fate, how they both were, and how the girl could not have been rational when she did what she did. Chantal was prepared to ease the entire blame onto herself if need be -- it would be preferable for McCoy to hate her than to continue hating himself.

Something within her made her believe it would work. It had worked on a great many agents -- it had worked on her. Its success no longer worried her. What did worry her was the payment Brandon Burns would demand for his services. The obvious, however personally distasteful to her, seemed too simple. Or simply too cruel to come from someone who knew her as completely as he did.

Coils and wisps. Air that almost smothers but is curiously relaxing. Warmth, the room's silence -- all soothing. Tight muscles beginning to unknot in the shoulders and neck. The pain behind the eyes easing as the tension that as its cause slowly drifts away. The mind carefully blank -- all problems and worries laid aside. For as long as can be -- as long as he can manage. Soon now -- just a little more time and he will be in that exquisite state of consciousness that comes directly before sleep. Floating, calm, peaceful, soon -- soon ...

"I believe the phrase is 'a penny for your thoughts', Captain."

Kirk's floating reverie was abruptly broken by the comment from the only other occupant of the small room in which he found himself. His peaceful mood destroyed, he momentarily glared at his First Officer, then gave it up as useless. Between the low level of illumination and the steam, Spock probably couldn't see his expression anyway.

Which was just as well. Kirk had been in a foul mood all day and he had been looking forward to this time to relax. This room, the men's combination sauna and steambath, was ordinarily empty at this hour, but, when he arrived half an hour earlier, he had discovered, to his chagrin, that the Vulcan was already comfortably ensconced in its warm and humid depths.

Kirk had not hidden his disappointment well. But Spock had ignored his friend's bad humor and had simply invited the Captain to join him. Kirk had hurriedly exchanged his uniform for more suitable attire and had taken up the Vulcan's suggestion. Until Spock's query, the human had almost forgotten he was not by himself.

But the spell was broken so he decided to make the best of it. Somehow he hadn't found the opportunity to talk to his closest friend about anything other than ship's business for several days. He had tried not to wonder if there were other reasons, and now, faced with the opportunity he decided it was as good a time as any, only to discover he could think of nothing he wished to discuss with Spock, or anyone else on board ship.

But he was sure an answer to the Vulcan's question was still being awaited so in true human fashion he tried the easy way out. "My thoughts? They aren't even worth a penny right now. I'm not really thinking of anything much, just daydreaming -- relaxing, I guess."

The Vulcan was not familiar with the phrase "a tissue of lies" but he was able to recognize the situation when it existed. "Yes, I see, Captain. It's quite logical to empty your mind of vexations and attempt to discover what peace you can attain."

Kirk was finding it hard to hear Spock, his voice being somewhat muffled, although he was seated on a bench only a few feet away, but he heard the tone of sarcasm -- or at least felt he did -- and found it curiously annoying. "Don't be patronizing. I said I'm in here to relax and that's what I'm doing. Besides, I don't have any vexations right now -- other than that I'm getting awfully hot." He picked up an already soggy towel that lie next to him and tried unsuccessfully to wipe off the perspiration that was dripping into his eyes.

"You know your own mental state better than I, of course. However I can think of some matters that should at least be of serious concern, if not vexing."

"Such as?" As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Kirk had the sinking feeling they should have remained unsaid.

A short pause ensued while the Vulcan was presumably marshaling his pristine mental processes. That accomplished, he began: "Such as several things, prime of which is our Security Chief. Nothing has been the same on the *Enterprise* since she managed to come aboard."

"She didn't 'manage' anything, she was assigned here like any crewman is." If there was anything in this universe Kirk didn't want to discuss at present, it was Lt. Caberfae, but somehow he had a feeling he wouldn't have much choice. Once Spock started on a topic his tenacity could cause him to worry it like a dog with a bone. "And I don't know what you mean by things not being the same. We're all going along the same as usual. In fact maybe better. Her department's efficiency ratings are way up."

"And," Spock interrupted smoothly, "not long ago our Chief Medical Officer's daughter killed herself on board, and it seems the Lieutenant was somehow involved. Now McCoy has had some sort of breakdown over the incident and she's again involved. They are on Babel, while we are out here doing nothing useful."

"Are you worried about Bones? He'll get the best medical care possible on Babel and I wouldn't be surprised if she helps arrange it. She seems quite fond of him."

"Indeed. I would venture to guess she could be 'fond' of anyone who could be of some use to her."

"That's a pretty vicious thing to say, Spock. Quit being mysterious and say what you mean." Kirk was in no mood for Vulcan subtlety.

"It is this. There's something wrong about her."

"Vulcan intuition, Mr. Spock?"

"No, Captain, fact, or at least viewing the facts closely. I have checked her records. They bear traces of being fitted together artificially. All her data of places she grew up, went to school, lived. They're all detailed perfectly. Now most personnel who have moved around as much as she seems to have done have slight gaps in their records. For example, say they left Mars two months before arriving on Sirius II and the trip only takes 6 weeks. This 'past' of hers has the feeling of an alibi, constructed after a crime. It's too neat."

"I had no idea you were such a detective." Kirk tried to laugh off his sudden feeling of uneasiness. "Have you come to any conclusions? What crime do you think she committed?"

"Unknown, Captain, or as yet undeduced. However I would hazard a speculation that it has something to do with whoever got her on this ship."

"That's just mildly ridiculous. That would involve Starfleet Command. Caidan and people like him. It's absurd. Next you'll be seeing some sort of conspiracy."

"Need I remind you that it was the Commodore himself who seems to have arranged the Doctor's stay on Babel?" This in quiet tones of a Vulcan clinching an argument. "Who knows what's being done to him?"

Kirk opened his mouth and told it not to stammer. "If I can't trust Starfleet then I have no business on this ship." He would liked to have paced the floor but the tiny space in which he was finding himself effectively precluded that activity.

"I do trust them, Jim. But you must see there is something peculiar going on."

"Maybe there is but as long as it doesn't endanger my ship I'm not going to worry about it." He said the words before he thought, then became aware of them, and sighed at their truth.

"You don't find the mystery intriguing?"

"No, I don't like mysteries. Let someone else handle them."

"You used to have a more curious nature."

"I used to be the youngest Captain in the Fleet. Times change, and so do people."

"If you have changed so much," Spock ventured, "perhaps you would be happier with another occupation."

"Maybe I would." This last spilled out of a man who hadn't realized he had ever been thinking it. Somewhat horrified, the Captain hurried to change the subject. "Other than her past what complaints do you have against the Lieutenant?"

"None specifically, once she got over her penchant for putting her own Security guards in Sickbay. She seems competent enough."

"That should win this month's 'Damned with Faint Praise' Award. You really don't like her, do you?"

"Not that it matters, Captain and be aware that I realize how truly vague a statement it is, but no, I do not. However, you seem to find her attractive enough for both of us."

Kirk had a sudden vision of a proud, lovely head topped by coiled masses of silvery hair, and tiny wisps curling around a haunting face. Then he realized exactly what his friend was implying. "How I find any crewman is my business, Spock," he said cautiously.

"Of course, sir." Spock might as well have been talking to a complete stranger.

Kirk sighed in exasperation, mostly at himself. It was so unfair to use his rank to hide behind in personal situations. "Look, I'm sorry, Spock. I don't even know how we got talking about all this anyway. I just came in here to relax and be alone for awhile." He stopped as he realized he was making matters worse.

"Indeed. I shall be happy to leave." As Spock was wearing only a Vulcan expression and a strategically placed towel Kirk couldn't repress a wry grin.

"Oh, sit down." He watched the Vulcan, who had reached the door, return and settle himself with as much grace as he could muster. "That isn't what I mean."

A pause then while each man tried to think of a safe topic of discussion. None seemed to immediately present itself. While the time inched along Kirk realized he was becoming very uncomfortable. He was used to the conditions normal to a sauna but it was now so hot that the wooden bench he was seated on was becoming uncomfortable to the back of his bare legs. Wrapping the towel he was wearing securely about his waist he made his way to the room's control panel, set on the wall directly opposite the door. It took a bit of doing to read the gauges through the swirling steam that seemed to constitute the area's total atmosphere but he persevered.

"Spock, no wonder I'm melting. This is set at the maximum. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I had no idea you were uncomfortable."

Kirk didn't bother to answer but reset the controls to a more usual level and returned to his seat. All in all this had not been a good day. The silence resumed but the Captain was now determined to keep up a conversation.

"Tell me, why are you here anyway? I know you enjoy the heat but I thought you preferred it dry. Why the steam?"

Spock shifted on his bench. "Remember when I said there were several things that could be of concern to you?"

"Please, I'm in no mood for guessing games."

"To get to the point then -- it's my sinuses. A definite product of my human nature."

"What about them?" Kirk was going to get him to the point if it took all night.

"I have what is colloquially known as a 'cold', an upper respiratory infection. My sinuses are blocked and the steam makes them ache less. It's as simple as that. Miss Chapel suggested 'taking steam'."

"Very good for it, really; now I understand, but I still don't see ... oh, I do." Kirk suddenly realized that such close proximity to a man with a cold was asking for trouble. "Oh, well, maybe there's nothing to worry about. I probably can't catch anything from you anyway."

"Jim, I had to have been infected by a human. It is only logical to presume that the process could also work in reverse."

"That's your cheerful thought for the day? Well, maybe I'll ..." The Captain toyed idly with the idea of leaving but decided it was too late. But it was a big ship, there must be something else to do. "I could drop in on that swimming party Linguistics is having," he was more or less thinking out loud, "there's this Lieutenant in that section ... I've noticed her before, short dark hair ..."

Spock broke his silence, a puzzled look on his face. "Jim, don't you tire of encounters like that?"

Kirk looked up in surprise, wondering what there was about steam that made everyone painfully honest, immediately defensive. "Like what? I don't know what you mean." His voice trailed off. He did indeed grow tired of them but what he felt inside he also felt totally incapable of relating to Spock. He could see his friend clearly now that the steam had lessened. One eyebrow was raised characteristically. For a fleeting moment Kirk wished Vulcan's could do something else to show interest and/or amusement -- blink, stick out their tongues, wiggle their ears, anything. But eyebrows aloft it was. "Don't look at me like that, you know I don't have any choice. I can't get serious about any woman on this ship."

"There are always choices."

"Then why don't I ever have any?" The truth again, coupled with the unspoken notion that if Spock knew of his preference -- if not his choice -- he would be likely to disapprove even more.

Even Spock had no logical answer for that question -- so as the conversation died a natural death, the two men sank back into their mutual solitude.

Peaceful and calm it was, even if it turned out to be the lull before the storm. Each man sat, together and yet alone. All needs and weaknesses, wants and desires, hidden by the enshrouding steam. Feathery white in insubstantial wisps and coils.

"Is he all right?" Chantal asked nervously as she touched McCoy's arm. "I've never been a spectator for this before."

Everything had gone extremely well, she told herself, and, surprisingly, much the way she had anticipated. With McCoy she went to the Arcturian exhibition, and, as she had expected she found it deadly dull, with the exception of the archeological section. They met Burns there and despite his snappy repartee McCoy appeared as disinterested as she felt. Chantal and Burns remained undaunted and occasionally succeeded in drawing McCoy into conversations however brief. She had learned a long time before to appreciate small victories. Afterwards she invited them both to her apartment for a drink and to view the tape Burns had conveniently provided. McCoy was reluctant but she stood her ground adamantly, and whether it was he himself or the tranquilizer Dr. Steel had administered, he finally acquiesced.

Foresightedly, Brandon Burns had provided a defective film and while feigning checking the projection unit Chantal substituted the light and sound cartridge. Again she didn't know whether to bless McCoy's benign state of mind or the tranquilizer, or to attribute the former to the latter. To her utter amazement he went wide-eyed within minutes and Burns proceeded to create the hypnotic state.

"Is he all right?" she repeated.

Burns finished checking McCoy's pulse. "Of course he is. We have our friends at the DC hospital to thank, too. The Divalium compound they've kept him on worked in our favor."

"How long can he stay that way?"

"Theoretically indefinitely. His state of suggestibility should be quite high as long as the light and sound continue, and he'll be cooperative in the trance."

"Can he hear us?"

"Yes, technically, but he doesn't care."

"If I ask him something, can he answer?"

"Yes, but speak plainly and simply. The more concise, the more effective."

Chantal stepped around the chair and stood before McCoy. She bent on one knee so she could face him. "Doctor, it's Chantal Caberfae. Can you hear me?"

"Yes, I can." His reply was slowly spoken.

"Do you know me?"

"Yes."

"Doctor, who are you and what is your job?"

"I am Leonard McCoy, Chief Medical Officer aboard the USS *Enterprise*."

She looked at Burns who nodded approvingly. "Do you have any children?"

There was a pause. Then: "I had a daughter."

"What was her name?"

"Joanna Lynette."

"What happened to her?"

"She died."

"Yes, she did. I want to talk to you about that. Do you remember what happened to her?"

McCoy twitched uncomfortably. Burns increased the intensity of the projected light on the wall screen. Chantal watched the starship doctor relax.

"Doctor, I want to talk to you about what happened to Joanna. The first thing I want to tell you is that none of it was your fault. None of it was your fault. She was unstable, her behavior was not rational. Joanna's mind was ill and in that illness, which was not your doing, she behaved irrationally. She took a disguise and in it she seduced you. Do you remember that?"

"We ... made love."

"In her sickness she thought she wanted to hurt you. But she was not responsible for her actions. Neither were you that night. You didn't know it was her." Chantal paused and looked to Burns.

"You spin a pretty web, girl," he said quietly, and frightened her. "Get on with it."

"She tried to kill herself that night but you prevented her. Doctor, you know that a person determined to commit suicide will succeed eventually."

McCoy nodded.

"As a doctor do you believe that a person who wants to end their own life is unstable?"

Another pause. "In some cases, yes."

"Joanna wanted to die, her illness in her mind made her want that, made her irrational." Chantal paused, realizing how little she believed what she said and how overly simplified it was. No matter, as long as she could make McCoy believe it. "Under the conditions that existed you had always been a loving father. You could not help what happened to her. You are not to blame. Do you understand that?"

"Yes."

"Does he?" she asked of Burns.

"You'll only know when he's conscious," he shrugged.

"Has that been enough?"

Burns nodded. "For the initial session, aye. Let me wake him. Replace the film now, the trance will hold him without the subliminals." He left his chair and went to McCoy. "Doctor, do you remember everything that's happened?"

"Yes."

"On the count of three you will wake up, you will feel very tired and want to go to sleep. You will remember only the substance of what Chantal has said to you, nothing more. Is that clear?" Burns returned to the seat he had originally.

"Yes."

Chantal nodded to Burns and set the film to show the closing credits.

"All right, Doctor, One, two, three ..."

McCoy's head nodded slightly. Chantal reached for the room light switch.

"That was very well put," she said, gesturing with one hand, "but when he began to explain the cultural backlash ... well, I feel his premise is faulty. Brandy, what do you think?" Her eyes implored him to pick up the heretofore nonexistent conversation.

"Perhaps, girl, but if you've read Kel'Ev's treatise on it ... Leonard, you've read it, don't you think he makes the Arcturian's premise valid?"

As all eyes turned to McCoy he put his hand to his head in a tentative gesture. "I'm sorry, I don't think I was paying attention. Must've dozed off." He looked to the blonde woman. "I told you I wouldn't be very good company," he said as he stood up.

Chantal came to his side. "Are you all right, Doctor?"

He nodded. "Sure, but I'm so tired. I think the afternoon took more out of me than I realized."

"Very logical reaction," she said, smiling over the Vulcan's favorite adjective. "After all, you've been somewhat inactive of late. You'll see, though, that'll change. By tomorrow I'll have our itinerary planned for the next several days."

"Now, Chantal ..."

"Doctor, I'll brook no resistance." She gave him her best smile and lightly touched his arm. "But let's not argue it tonight. You do look very tired."

"Think I'll turn in," he said, rubbing the back of his neck. He looked to Burns who was trying very hard not to appear as though he was watching, and extended his hand. "Dr. Burns ..."

"Brandon," he said as he came to his feet and shook hands.

"Right. Sorry I wasn't better company."

"Nonsense, Leonard. We all have our off days."

Chantal took McCoy by the arm and led him to the door.

"I don't think I'll need an escort, Chantal," McCoy said, patting her hand lightly. "I'm sure I can manage the space between our doors without aid."

"As you like."

"Chantal ... thanks. I ... I mean that." He looked at her then, silently searching her face. "You are very sweet, to bother entertaining me. Good night then."

She closed the door behind him and leaned against it momentarily. On the other side of the room she saw Burns filling two glasses.

"Come on, girl. You look like you need it." He held out the glass to her.

Chantal took the glass, sniffing over the rim to identify its contents. She sat on the sofa, kicked off her shoes, put her feet up, and emitted a loud sigh.

"Now it wasn't that bad," Burns chuckled softly.

"Is he really all right?"

"He's fine. And a splendid subject, from what I can judge. It'll work, if that's what you're wondering."

"Thank God."

"Whoever." He pulled the ottoman closer to the sofa and sat on it. "You've got another, haven't you?"

She looked at him, puzzled.

"Your friend, the doctor. He dotes on you. At least he'd like to. It's all over his face when he talks to you."

She grimaced. "That's ridiculous. He likes women but, in his present condition he's not catering to any of his notions."

"You should know," he said, "that there could be a problem with that. It's a form of transference."

"I know what transference is, a patient becoming infatuated with a professional who's treating him. How can that happen if McCoy doesn't know what's happening?" She was very excited.

"Relax, girl, you'll rupture something. I said it was a form. In the textbook cases a patient is being treated by a doctor, for a physical or emotional problem. Because of the doctor's importance in the patient's life he becomes a focal point for all of the patient's emotions -- fear, anger, love -- very often love because the doctor is in the role of savior."

"But he doesn't know he's being treated," she protested.

"Will you listen another five seconds? The fact is that he is being treated and there'll be a gradual improvement. As this happens you'll be the only person close to him here. It's very likely he'll attribute this new feeling of well-being to you, at least some of it. Of course there are ramifications -- he's looking for someone to replace a lost loved one, for example. Or he may just think it's from all your forthright insistence of his innocence. Whatever the reason, it's very likely he'll end quite smitten with you."

The grimace returned. "That's absurd. And it's terrible. Kirk's bad enough --"

"Ah-hah!" he pointed a finger and chuckled. "I knew it. You've snared one!"

"No, that's not what I mean. Kirk is a problem because he doesn't know my real job and so I have to lead him on about many things."

"Surely a little white lie here and there is painless to someone like you."

"You're nasty."

"It's a nasty business. Why don't you quit?"

She looked at him totally startled. "What would I do?"

"Work for Firejewels in earnest," he offered. "Open a boutique. Marry me."

"What?" she blurted incredulously.

"Think of it, a live-in sparring partner."

"No thank you, Doctor." Silently she watched the amber liquid in her glass. Brandy was ever an enigma and though he was perfectly in character to insult her in one breath and propose in the next, she didn't understand it and she liked it even less. He was one of the few people who confused her. The problem with McCoy was taking on more complicated facets than she felt capable of handling and she resented the distraction Burns was becoming. Burns and his damned payment.

"What's the matter? Have you gone into shock?"

"No, but I'd like to go to sleep. As they say, it's been a long day."

"I can take a hint. When is our next little soiree?"

"I shall have to let you know as soon as I know. My schedule is getting very crowded suddenly. I have to see Caidan tomorrow, then I have to meet with the other Alphas who are in off the circuit. After that the projectionist and I are going to exchange updates." Remembering her meeting with Todmeister didn't improve her mood. "I'm surprised I don't have to complete the standard report forms in quad-copy."

"You love it. We all do or we wouldn't be here, and you know it."

She swung her legs back over the edge of the couch and came to her feet. He watched her approach him, wondering what she would do. With a provocative smile she took the glass from his hand.

"I know that it's late, that I'm tired," she said as she ushered him to the door, "and that you're leaving. Good night, Doctor Burns," she said as she opened the door. "Thank you so much for your help. I'll be in touch."

"Aye," Burns nodded, still smiling. "That you will. Sleep well, girl."

After setting the door lock Chantal picked up her shoes, turned off the lights and went into the bedroom. The same faerie who took care of her clothes could tidy the parlor. She slipped out of the two-piece black velvet suit and welcomed the caress of the bedsheets, Burns' words still in her mind. Closing her eyes, she wondered if he was aware that she couldn't remember the last time she had slept well.

Arms folded, Paul Caidan shifted his weight restlessly from one foot to the other. No, Chantal wasn't vain, not in the true sense, but when she had an audience she made use of it. Her impromptu exhibition in the OSS gymnasium had already lasted twenty minutes beyond the time they were to go to lunch. He wondered why the others watched her so raptly since nearly all of them were as proficient as she was on the apparatus. Proficient, perhaps, but not as gracefully perfect nor as imaginative in the combinations of acrobatic maneuvers. Surely some of it came from her skill at dancing, he remembered dreamily. Looking at the group clustered around the floor, he noted she was the only Alpha agent working out; perhaps she was the best in the room.

She was always a puzzle whose sections never quite fitted to make the complete picture. Two and two was never exactly four about her. At least not from his view, and he fancied that he knew her better than anyone else did. $X + Y$ would ordinarily equal perfection ... perfection plus perfection would equal ... and they did, sometimes, but only on the surface. When he thought about it at all he was relieved that he never became too enamored of the near-beautiful face and perfect ... dear Lord, that word again ... body. She didn't intoxicate the senses, she left them in a state of dishabille. Not from passion, just confusion.

This same talented lady who glided so smoothly between the uneven parallel bars had also tripped over furniture as well as stepped on his foot when they danced. If there was ever such a thing as flawed perfection that would be her, but that was incongruous. So was she. Still, he blessed the day he found her in Phaedra's Menagerie of Extra-Terrestrial Wonders.

With a backward flip she dismounted the bars and smiled politely at those who had been watching her. The cluster of people disintegrated quickly as another soul mounted the bars to begin his workout. Caidan saw her approach and held out a towel.

"At least I can be certified physically fit," she said with a light smile.

"There was never a doubt in that area," he returned lightly, waving a hand before her body. She did have her imperfections physically but he could think of duceedly few women who could pass close scrutiny unclothed as well as she could. Between the fit itself and the moisture brought forth from the physical activity, her leotard hugged her body as though it had been painted on, clinging obligingly to the very trim bustline, tapered waist, and gently swelled hips. The peach cloth accented the hue of her own skin which always seemed to have a faint glow.

"I think it's all quite foolish," she said, ignoring his gaze, "to make me meet Prereqs in the middle of an assignment. And don't start talking to me about 'the man upstairs'. Listening to Brandy you'd think he really was a god."

"Perhaps our captain only wants to make sure you're fit since this is such an important assignment."

"And listening to you makes me think of Kirk," she sighed, "and I don't want to."

"As far as we're concerned Todmeister is god, mother, captain, country, and anything else we might owe allegiance to," Caidan said with feigned respect.

Chantal flapped the towel in front of her face. "I need air," she grinned. "I'm going to shower. Will you wait?"

"Haven't I always?"

"I won't be a minute."

She was through the lockerroom door before he could think of a suitable reply. He left the gym to wait in the sitting room outside.

"I saw your scores from yesterday," he said over the apertif. "Just as good as the ones Kees invented for you the time before."

"How did you know that?" The last marinated mushroom consumed, she pushed away her plate.

"Todmeister and I have a functional arrangement. What he doesn't know, I do. It seems to work out nicely. When will you see the other agents?"

"I'd like to ... throw two stones? ... how do you say it, accomplish two things at once?"

"Kill two birds ..." he offered.

She nodded. "I'll update the projectionist when I see him and the other Alphas can get it there. Paul, there just is not enough time. I've only four days left and with the exception of this afternoon in the gym I haven't had a moment to catch my breath."

"Well, we'll have a long leisurely lunch for you to relax through."

"Only if we can manage it in less than an hour. Leonard and I have a date."

"So it's Leonard now, is it?"

She shrugged. "It got very confusing with both Brandy and him being doctors. First name basis facilitated things immensely."

"And how goes the war?"

"A few victories in the early skirmishes. It seems to be working very well. I don't think I doubted it would with Brandon helping. But it's kept me on the trot continuously. The first day we went to the Arcturian exhibition. The next day we saw the matinee and evening performances the Duhr Troupe presented of two Terran classical plays. On the third day," she paused to take a sip of water, "Leonard and Brandy went to the DC hospital to watch some new type of surgical technique being used in an operation -- fortunately I couldn't attend that -- and that evening we ... where did we go? I can't recall. There's been something or another every single day and night since we arrived. And Kirk thinks I'm having a holiday here."

"From your description of the events I'd be inclined to agree."

"When I'm on holiday I use less theatrics. The entire reason for all of this is to bring McCoy back to the world of the living. And nearly every night we bring him back, to my apartment, for another therapy session."

"Just what is Burns doing to him?"

"Tsk, Commodore, I thought you knew half of everything."

"Remember the rule, what I know Todmeister doesn't, and vice versa."

Chantal pondered momentarily. "Then you mean he knows about this?"

"I daresay you wounded him when you didn't ask permission."

She made a face. "You couldn't wound him with a lasar scalpel. Since I haven't heard from him I gather he isn't angry."

"No, he isn't. On the contrary he seemed rather amused by your sentimentality. Officially he didn't object because Burns is on his own time. Actually the only person unhappy with you is a Teletech who was monitoring your good doctor's apartment."

Chantal remembered the actions surrounding her disabling the monitor camera.

"I've wanted to ask you myself, though. Why didn't you ask him outright?"

"I ... I couldn't, not after that meeting. I know it sounds foolish but my pride felt terribly offended by the way he treated me so I wasn't about to ask him for favors."

"He might have been very angry."

"He's been angry with me before. What would he do, send me out to risk my life?"

"Actually, he surprised me, too. I thought he'd be quite ... shall we say displeased."

She waved a hand as though to dismiss the topic. "I'll settle up with the Deathmaster before I leave. If I have the time." She was about to comment on the length of time it was taking to be presented with their meal when a waiter brought it.

"So you're a threesome," he commented.

She nodded, her mouth full of lettuce.

"Tell me, how are Burns and your friend getting along?"

"Now that is the truly wonderful part, they're getting along famously. Brandy looks like Kirk, he drinks like our chief engineer, and he's a doctor. With the exception of the absence of Vulcan ears McCoy scarcely knows he's left the *Enterprise*. And you know how Brandy can be. When he's in his cups he's so speciously logical you could swear he's making sense even when you know he isn't. I may never get McCoy back. It's much less taxing arguing with a one-man crew."

"And he hasn't the least idea ..."

"Not the least. It's working, though. He seems much better. Dr. Steel took him off the Divalium yesterday. While he may not be totally recovered -- and how could one expect him to be -- by the time the *Enterprise* comes back for us, he'll be functional. That's all I can ask of the situation."

"What's in store for the trio tonight? I'm free, perhaps we could make it a foursome."

"Well," she began slowly, "we're not a trio tonight. McCoy is taking me to a hologram show and then a late supper." She looked at Caidan's face, displeased with his smug expression. "Please don't look like that; I have enough of it from Brandy. The Doctor is not falling for me. We're friends, that's all."

"Chantal, I didn't say a word."

"You don't have to, I know you. But you're wrong. I'm really not at all his type anyway. And after that lecture Brandy gave me about transference I've been extremely careful. I wish I could dispell the notion you and he have that every man who knows me falls captivated at my feet. Would that it were true, maybe I'd leave the business."

"Forgive me for staring but I'm totally amazed to hear something like that from you. Are you serious?"

"No ... yes. I don't know. There are times when I feel just dreadfully tired of it all. I don't know what keeps me here. I have money enough to retire now and live lavishly into a comfortable old age."

"I remember a conversation over lunch some months ago," he said. "You were so enthusiastic about this mission. What happened to all that fire and music?"

She pressed her palms together and stared briefly. "Nothing, Paul. Not really. I'm quite myself. Just terribly tired. I know you'll say you told me so but this *Enterprise* assignment is much more complex than I had anticipated. Living so closely with so many people ... It's difficult to be on stage all the time. As much as I appreciated the new leads Miss McCoy did me no service at all when she decided to have her personal tragedy in my arena of operations. I had other uses for the effort I have to put into making reparations with McCoy. And with Brandy at my --" She broke off abruptly as she realized what she was about to say. Caidan couldn't possibly know everything about her past arrangement with Burns. As much as he liked her personally he would never have allowed her back into the field unfit.

"What about Burns?"

"Oh, you know we don't get along very well, that's all it is. Our personalities clash, and we've had to work together very closely."

"Are you sure that's what it is?"

"Whatever do you mean?"

"I just thought perhaps Brandy would like to be more than a casual antagonist to you."

Somehow all her polite resolution evaporated and she slammed down her fork. "Paul Caidan, I have had all I can stand of your insinuations, and those of Doctor Burns. I am absolutely disgusted with your inferences, and his. Ever since I got here I've had one or the other of you, or Todmeister, telling me my business, or what I really think, or how I feel, or how the situation ought to be perceived. The only one who hasn't cast some aspersion on my credibility or expressed some thinly veiled suggestions about my personal life has been Dr. McCoy. So if you'll excuse me, and even if you don't, I think I'll go to him now."

She left the chair, and her half-finished meal and stalked out of the dining room without looking back. Caidan sipped his coffee and smiled to himself over the incident. She certainly was beautiful when she was angry. Beautiful, and very revealing.

"Can you light the fire?" Chantal asked, pointing to the artificial fireplace. "I know it isn't authentic but it looks rather nice when it works."

McCoy, finally losing to the temptation to loosen the collar fastenings on his dress uniform shirt, watched her as she walked to the bar. He turned tentatively to the object of her directions, then back to her. "I think I can manage."

"Would you like a drink? I didn't have the time to give them a stock list in order to refill so I'm not sure what's left. What with our gathering her almost nightly we've put quite a ... dunk ..."

"Dent" he offered.

"Whatever ... there isn't much choice. Do you like white wine?"

"Anything will be fine," he said, busying himself with the apparatus built into the wall to resemble the natural stone fireplaces of older days. "Oh, I had lunch with Brandy this afternoon. You know, it's really a shame he isn't in space service. He could get a great commission with what he knows about psychology."

Chantal was grateful her guest couldn't see the look on her face. Then she relaxed, feeling sure Burns wouldn't have given any of their scheme away. "I believe he was in space service once, many years ago. He's had quite a few assignments."

"There are times when I've envied doctors with varied careers. On the other hand I suppose I should be glad I haven't had the opportunity to see some of the things they've encountered." He looked rather pleased as the synthetically fueled flames overtook the artificial logs behind the grilling. He stood, rubbing his hands together and wondering why since there really was no dust; it just seemed to be a natural reaction to starting a warm fire. Turning, he saw her approaching with a tray. "Can I help?"

"If you would, put that small table before the fireplace." She nodded in the direction of a low carved table and watched him retrieve it. Then she placed the tray bearing the wine bottle and two glasses upon it. Carefully arranging her skirt, which was floor length but slit to above her knees, much to her distaste, she sunk slowly to the furry-carpeted floor next to the table. Looking at McCoy, who seemed alarmingly enrapt, she smiled. "Won't you sit down?"

"You make a very pretty picture of an invitation," he said as he joined her.

Deftly she lifted the decanter made of handcut crystal and filled two glasses from it. He took the one she offered him with a smile.

"Did you like the show?" she ventured, desperate for conversation. She had assumed Brandy would join them afterwards, as he had done before. She expected to find him, as usual, arms folded, leaning against the doorway, as they walked up the hall, but he wasn't there. He had been, if the note he left on the bar could be taken as an indication. After reading the first line of yet another of his prickling verses, she had crumpled the note in her hand and shoved it amidst the empty bottles under the bar. Perhaps he had been called away unexpectedly. But why hadn't he left a proper note explaining?

"Great," he said, and she almost didn't hear him. "Hologram is one of my favorite things; I really enjoy visual effects like that. The Yoek team is known all over the better part of the galaxy for their work. I've wanted to see them for some time now, but you know how it goes. Wherever they perform, I'm a week behind them. Almost caught them on Sirius once but we got an emergency call and ... well, I'm sure you don't want to hear all that. I'm amazed at my luck in finally being at the same place with them in time to catch a show."

Chantal sipped her wine silently, deciding there was no accounting for taste. She didn't like hologram; she didn't like anything that altered her preception of reality. From what she had seen of hologram in her life, she thought too that Yoek gave a rather mediocre performance. "It's a shame we won't be here for the carnival," she said at last, realizing he was waiting for some comment from her. "The Golden Ligian will be here performing and I've always wanted to see a natural flipper. You know, the tricks where they turn things inside out. Balls, gloves, what-have-you."

"You like magic?"

"Some of it, the real things. I've heard of the Ligian before and he's said to be very good. Alas, the carnival is only annual here and we'll leave before it even comes into port."

McCoy seemed to sigh. "It's going to be mighty hard getting back into the groove after all this." He paused and looked into his glass. "You know, Chantal, there's been something I've wanted to say to you ..."

She shook her head. "It's all right, really ..."

"No, let me. These days here ... I ... I don't know what to say about them. I know how I felt when I arrived and I know how I feel now. What I don't know is how the change happened. I don't know what changed but something has."

"May I speak frankly?"

He nodded.

"A friend once told me that grief is much like tossing a small stone into a pond. The circles in the water widen more and more until they fianlly fade so far you can scarcely see the ripples. The grief is always there, the pain is always there. But gradually a person learns to live with it."

"There was a time when I thought I never would. I don't think I cared either. I didn't want to do anything but lay down in my tracks and simply cease existing. I didn't think I'd ever want to do anything else, certainly not want to practice medicine again." He came to his feet and paced a short distance from her. "But now ... I don't know how to say it. I feel so much ... better." He held his hands in front of him in a gesture.

"Perhaps it is in no longer being sedated by the doctor. I have heard it said that consistant tranqui-
lization can alter one's personality alarmingly and act as a depressant." She had a vague idea of what he was trying to tell her and decided she definitely didn't want to hear it. Damn him, where was Burns?

McCoy shook his head. "It's not that ... I'm a doctor, give me credit for knowing that much. It's having been here these last few days. Yet I know intellectually that there isn't anything mystical about Babel anymore than there is about Vulcan."

"As I told the Captain, I was sure that a change of scenery would help you. I am pleased that it did."

"That seems too simple," McCoy said. "You know, it's made me feel guilty in a way, as though I don't have any right to recover from Joanna's death."

"The survivors are obliged to live," Chantal said without thinking. "I'm ... I'm sorry; I didn't mean to be so blunt."

"Your bluntness is obviously just what I did need. Since I couldn't haul myself up by my bootstraps it's a very good thing someone else tried to. You know, Chantal, I don't think I could have done it alone."

My dear Doctor, she thought, you don't know the half of it. "I'm sorry if I was harsh. It's the way I am, I'm afraid. I ... I knew what you were doing to yourself. It's very easy to let grief take over. I just couldn't let that happen. Not to you." She stopped, wondering what she really meant by the last comment. I've got to get away from these people for awhile; I don't know what they're doing to me and I don't think it's a very good thing to happen, at least not to me. Mawkish sentimentality, that's all it is.

"Oh, well," he sighed, returning to sit near her. "I suppose I'm making an issue out of something that is -- or should be -- quite natural. It's strange, really. As a doctor I should be the first person to espouse your attitude. But when things are close to home ..."

"It's very understandable," she nodded. Stealing a quick glance at the wall chronometer, she silently cursed Burns. Where was he?

"I know you're right. But it just seems to have happened so fast. Much faster than I ever would have thought."

She wondered briefly if he suspected what had been occurring. Burns was a thorough professional, though, and she knew if he said McCoy would never know unless he was told, then that was how it was.

"I think perhaps you are right about your feeling guilty, and that is the cause for your perplexity. Joanna would not want you to spend the rest of your life in limbo. Surely you know that."

McCoy shrugged. "I guess I feel that it's just not like me. Truly, Chantal, I know what an irascible determined cuss I can be at times. You know, I never really knew her, not very well. I wasn't home much when she was a child; then we sent her away to school. I can't find the words to explain the incredible sense of loss -- now I'll never know her." He paused reflecting.

"I see that my task is far from finished if you intend to persist in torturing yourself over the fact that you have elected to live despite the pain. There's no percentage in remembering the past, Leonard."

He smiled. "I'm sorry, Chantal. I told you I'm irascible. I know I should probably be down on my knees thanking God, or you, or probably both of you, for what you've done for me."

She shrugged. "Well, you are trying on one's patience, that's a fact. But I am very pleased to see you yourself again."

"If I think about it long enough I'll manage to feel guilty about all this," he said, gesturing as though to encompass the entire scene. "Although I'm far from averse to spending an evening in the company of a very charming lady."

"Who likes to haul people up by their bootstraps?"

"A very intuitive lady who works hard to make people see what's best for them. You know, Chantal, you're a very special person."

The woman tried not to sigh visibly over mentally hearing Burns' warning. Was this what he was referring to? Surely McCoy was just expressing his gratitude over what happened. Obviously it was natural to consider that she had a great effect on his change of attitude. Burns ... where in the Nine Hells is he? Still, it was pleasant to be with McCoy who treated her with a rather deferential kindness and respect. Only because he doesn't know you, she told herself. Considering his high moral fiber he'd probably be as appalled as Brandy is amused by some of the things you've done in your life. And if he knew about Joanna, he'd hate you; he'd never ever forgive you. McCoy was not the kind of man Caidan was, who would always meet you on level ground.

Why am I thinking about this? What possible difference does it make what sort of man McCoy is; he's not part of my life, not really. Once we've finished here and go back to the ship, everything will be as it was before. Or at least as nearly the same as is possible. I can't think clearly tonight ... tonight? More precisely not for some time. Where is Burns?

"Chantal?" The voice called her back to reality.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she dissembled. "I ... I was just thinking ... about how comfortable this is."

"Nostalgia," he offered. "Do you remember much about living with your people? As your doctor I've seen your records. I know you left when you were quite young."

"I remember bits and pieces. Yes, like this, sitting by the fireside. Listening to my grandsire tell the tales about the great battles that preceded his becoming Teer of the Tribes. I remember things as though they were shadows -- my mother bent over the cook-fire, a friend of Akaar who was a soldier, letting us sit on his great war-beast. Just remnants."

"You've made an incredible adjustment, coming from such a feudal society into ours."

"I often speak to you of survival, Leonard. Surely you must know I learned it myself at some point in my life. Truly, I remember very little. I've not been home since I left. That's not to say I am ignorant of my cultural heritage. What I could not remember, I learned elsewhere."

"I spent a lot of time with your people. They're ... oh, how I hate the word ... fascinating."

"I think what you found fascinating was the urge to convert them to your Federation's ways. They presented a great Crusade."

He smiled and nodded.

"I'm sure you would be pleased to know how highly thought of you are among them, even though not always understood. I'm told my cousin Eleen ..."

"Your cousin ..."

"Well, in a manner of speaking, since she married into our Tribe. She named her son for you."

"As well as for Jim," he added.

"A very high tribute to outworlders, you know. We are tied by a multitude of ancient customs."

"I've heard there's a display of Capellan heraldry somewhere in the Heritage Hall. No doubt accompanied by some sort of panoramic view of their history. Would you like to see that tomorrow?"

"Really, Doctor, now who's forcing whom to ..."

"I know, I know, but we only have three days left. There always seem to be so many things to see at Babel. I thought this one would be especially interesting. What one of us doesn't understand, the other could explain."

She demured with a shy smile. The last thing she found appealing was another exhibit and lecture, on anything, but she had to play the part. "Of course, I'd like it very much."

"Perhaps your friend would like to come with us."

Brandy again, and still not present. "He might, if he's not otherwise engaged. I shall speak to him."

McCoy seemed to look around at the setting, then turned back to her. "Chantal ... this is really very nice. I ... I don't know how to thank you. I'm sure there are a number of other things you'd just as soon be doing with your time on Babel rather than rehabilitating me. I really, sincerely, appreciate everything you've done."

"I ... I haven't done anything," she said, rising to her feet. She reached for the wine decanter, seeing a convenient escape route. *No, she thought, I haven't done a thing except try to put you back together after I ruined your life.* "I think perhaps I ought to refill this."

She stepped across the room, decanter in hand, to the bar, again cursing Burns as she thought of him. The conversation had come full circle more than once and she'd prefer McCoy discussed anything at all other than his gratitude. Obviously things were working well since he did feel so much better. She made a mental note to ask Burns, whenever she saw him again and after she was done venting her feelings about his stranding her for so long, just exactly when they would be finished treating him. After all, there were only three days left.

"Where were you?" Chantal demanded. The flickering candlelight of Burns' apartment set a placidity in high contrast to her mood. "I've been stalling Leonard for hours with small talk while I waited for you."

Brandon Burns, feeling totally in control in his own lair, sat calmly in his highbacked chair, watching the blonde woman and enjoying her anger. With utter ease he closed the book he had been reading as she stormed in and smiled at her.

"Brandy, are you drunk again?"

"No, girl, I am not. Didn't you get my message?"

She looked at the crumpled wad of paper she had clenched in her hand and tossed it at his feet. "I'd scarcely call one of your ... your verses ... a message. And to leave it in plain view where it could have been read by anyone ..." She realized she was stammering and tightly closed her mouth.

"You've a way with words yourself, to judge from all those pretty speeches you've been making to the Doctor these nights passed. Surely now you could've explained it."

"Brandy, I'm tired, too tired to play games with you. What's going on? I sat through an infernally poor quality hologram show because Leonard fancies them, had an even longer dinner in a tavern reeking of syntobac smoke, and then dodged and evaded lengthy discussion with him for the rest of the evening while I waited for you."

"Did he tell you about our lunch?" he asked quietly.

"No -- yes. I mean he mentioned it in passing. Why?"

"Because girl, I've decided we're done."

"What?"

"Aye, finished. Your good Doctor is as well as he's liable to get without intensive, long-term treatment. In fact, he doesn't even need it. I daresay you've quite a talent in my field. But of course, without me ..." He shook his head and made a vague gesture with his hands.

"Finished," Chantal repeated quietly. "Could he relapse?"

"Could the worlds end tomorrow? Anything is possible, but it's not probable. The DC doctors are pleased as punch, albeit a mite baffled for an answer. They'll give him a clean bill of health when he goes back to his ship, never fear. No doubt everyone will chalk it up to your tender loving care. Alas, my unsung genius will ever be the bane of my existence. So you see, girl, there was no reason for me to come tonight."

Chantal lowered herself slowly on to the sofa as Burns left his chair. Her eyes followed him as he filled a glass from a decanter. She felt suddenly chilled and shaken, the way she often felt when she awoke suddenly, not quite knowing where she was. "It seems so anticlimatic," she said at last. "There should be a fanfare, a blare of horns or the tolling of great bells." She paused. "He'll be well now," she repeated. "Such a simple thing to say."

"It's not a miracle, girl. This isn't the 20th century. He was sick. I cured him. That's all."

Her mind wrestled with reality, trying to discern the reason for her anxiety one minute, feeling the answer's full force the next. McCoy was well. For that she could be deliriously happy. But now there was Burns and his hitherto unnamed payment. The urge to flee was overwhelming. She'd had no intention of meeting his price, indeed no intention of ever confronting him in order to be told it was time to pay. Instead she had planned to escape, as she had before, just prior to learning that completion was near. She was half-way sure he knew she planned to, and that he accepted it. Now things were different and Chantal was very much afraid of what thoughts lie yet unspoken behind Brandy's too-sweet smile and sudden lack of verbosity. *When in doubt*, she thought, *bluff*.

"Would you like a drink?" she heard him ask.

She shook her head. "I've an early morning tomorrow. McCoy wishes to see the Capellan heritage exhibition. So I really must leave." Long strides took her to the door.

"No, girl," he said quickly, "you must stay. You made me a promise."

She turned, full of dread, and faced him. As she did, the hood of her gown fell about her shoulders. "In that event, I'll take the drink." She knew he heard the tremor in her voice.

He poured a second glass pointedly left the two of them on the table, and approached her, watching her eyes widen. "We have a deal," he said. "Or had you forgotten again?" He stood an arm's length from her.

She swallowed hard and shook her head. "No," she said horsely.

"You asked me for help and I saved your friend from a fate worse than space service. You promised to pay." He eyed her carefully, obviously appreciating what he saw. "Seven years ago I did the same for you and you promised then, too."

"I'm very nearly wealthy," she said airily, folding her arms in vain hopes of feeling further away from him.

He laughed sharply. "I don't want money."

The tears she felt welling in her eyes embarrassed her. She had been determined not to weaken in front of him but her resolve dissolved from his nearness. All that remained was blatant ill-concealed fear.

"I want you, Chantal. Has there ever been any doubt?" He reached to touch a wisp of pearly hair, watched her cringe, and drew back his hand.

"I can't, Brandon. Please, anything else."

He shook his head slowly.

"Please, Brandon, you of all people know that I can't --"

"I don't give a damn what I know," he shouted and heard himself, then exhaled. "I don't give a damn about your bruised psyche or your phobias. I know the story, remember? Lovely Chantal who's smiled and flirted her way into the service, charmed her way into Todmeister's favor and into all the best missions. The sensuous lady who laughed when she was assigned to work in the Dragon Chateau undercover -- or would that be more aptly under covers? Chantal the ice maiden who can't bear to have a man touch her."

"Please ... you know why that is." The once-welled tears streamed down her cheeks.

"Aye, I know, and I'll make no pretense of having a desire to cure you, to divest you of these foolish fears, to woo you gently into my bed. I want your body. I wanted it seven years ago and I do now. You made me a promise."

He reached to her again. Her eyes followed his hand and just as it touched her cheek she recoiled with an anguished sob. "No, Brandon, please, no ..."

Enraged, he raised a hand as though to strike her and paused in mid gesture. He felt helpless and embarrassed and resented her all the more for making him feel guilty when she was the one who was planning to doublecross him. "For the sake of the job you let them send you to rut with every being who had the price. Why do you refuse me what you gave so freely?"

She didn't answer, she sobbed.

"Dammit, I'm not ill-favored. I'm humanoid, like you, and you know how simple the act would be between us. You owe me. There are three days left. In that much time I could turn your friend into a vegetable for the rest of his life."



"You ... you wouldn't ..." she gasped.

The silence felt eternal to the woman and she stared at the figure in the shadows. "No, I wouldn't."

Then Chantal remembered that in the remaining three days she still had to go on psychosimulator. Would he also use that as a lever? "Brandon, if you force me I'll hate you for the rest of my life."

"Undoubtedly you will. Make no mistake, I won't try to force you. I'm well aware that you could easily break my neck in physical combat. No, girl, you'll walk in there," he pointed to the bedroom, "voluntarily."

"Why are you doing this to me?" she whimpered.

"Would you rather it was your friend McCoy? Or that Jim Kirk he talks so much about?"

"Brandon, you know that's not true. You know that I just cannot ..."

"Ah, but you can. That's the triumph, don't you see? That you will, with me."

Suddenly Chantal felt there was no more to be said. The situation smacked of having infinite merit of revelation that she couldn't quite grasp. It also felt out of hand, and to say she didn't like it was an understatement of the most extreme kind. With painful waves her memory's eye was washed with faces and sounds from the past, muffled voices, the touch of tentacles, a cloven hoof, the sensation of cold, hard, scaled skin against her own. She forced back the memories as she had fought back the revulsion. It was true, Brandon was not ill-favored. At least there was that.

"Very well," she said and crossed the room. "Let's have done with it."

"Not so fast, girl," he caught her arm. For the briefest of long moments their gazes locked. "You're indebted twice over. I claim the night."

"Brandon, you said --" she began, horrified.

"I said I wanted you, and that you gave your word to me."

Resignation branding her, he released her. She walked before him into the bedroom and began to undo the fastenings of her dress. As she stepped out of it she heard him close the door behind her.

The soft music of the chronometer chimes at last managed to creep through her unconscious state of sleep, and as it did so, Chantal turned slowly between the sheets. She opened her eyes slowly, as she was taught to do ages before, when unsure of her condition, or her surroundings. She sighed, relieved to see her own room about her.

She had returned to it some hours before, shortly before dawn, when Burns finally slept. Removing her gown, which she had decided she would never wear again, she stepped into the shower, running the water as hard and as hot as the tap would produce it, and stood under it as long as she could bear it, until she felt her skin ache and saw it turning pink. She turned off the faucet and stepped out, reaching for a towel and refusing to look in the mirror. Still damp, she had crawled into bed, pulling the covers up over her shoulders, and willed herself to sleep, forcing the memories of what had recently transpired as far from her mind as she could drive them, only to have them return in her troubled sleep. Burns' image, alternating with that of James Kirk, tormented her until the timepiece's notes finally woke her.

Telling herself she had to get out of bed, she did so, and walked into the bathroom. Now, she said, she would face the mirror. I am still the same, she insisted to the image that looked back. The bruises seemed to stand out starkly against the creamy color of her skin under the room's harsh light. She touched her face, scowling at the hint of dark circles around her eyes as well as at her slightly swollen lips. She shuddered then, again jousting with the memories that flooded her mind, and covered her face with her hands. *Shame, she thought, is not a solitary thing ... and it finds completeness in having someone else know you are feeling it.* She reached into the shower and started the cold water, resolution beginning to take hold. Unfortunately, I am not one to be prone to hysteria. Facing the mirror again she started to unpin her hair.

Chantal was nearly dressed when the telecom buzzed. Ascertaining that she was decent, she punched the buttons of the wall unit and watched the screen form a picture of Leonard McCoy.

"I'd say good morning but I think you missed it," he said smiling.

She did her best to return his good humor and forced a weak sleepy smile. "I over slept," she offered simply. "I daresay the events of the last several days are catching up with me."

"I've been calling all morning. It's a beautiful day today. I've been looking through this directory," she saw him reaching for a tape cartridge "and it says there's a sidewalk cafe in the ... oh, hell, I've found it on the map, I'm sure between the two of us we could locate it. Are you hungry?"

In truth, food was the furthest thing from her mind. "Famished. That sounds very nice."

"Then I'll pick you up. In fifteen minutes? Will that give you enough time to complete your female beauty rituals?"

"More than enough," she tried to smile again. "I'll be expecting you."

The screen went blank and she stepped away from it. She walked to the bureau and picked up her brush. *Fifteen minutes ... yes, she thought, that should be enough time, to brush my hair and have a good cry.*

On the other side of the telecom, McCoy walked away from his wall unit, running a hand over his freshly shaven face. He noticed he was whistling as he reached for a fresh uniform shirt and the clear-eyed face that looked back at him in the mirror was a welcome sight. *Yes, that lady knows about life, he thought. There's a fountain of insight behind those green eyes.*

Who are you kidding? he thought, *there's more than insight to her. She's one of the most beautiful women you've ever seen, or ever known. She's clever, witty, extremely good company. And that perfume ... he could still sense it in the air, even though she had never been in the room.*

She's right, of course, life must go on. There would be time now to sort out his thoughts and feelings as he became more capable of coping with them. More than causing a cessation of some kind, she had caused a turning point, a starting point. She ... it had been her all along. Her idea to bring him to Babel, her forcing him to go out when he would've preferred to sit in his room tranquilized so he couldn't so much as form a thought or a memory. Even though she didn't seem to say much it must have been her tirade about facing life that started him to thinking properly again.

He did feel guilty, and the urge to brood often had to be forced out of his mind, but he was surprised at how well his emotions were listening to his intellect. Ever the one to want to alter the unpleasant aspects of reality, he was repeatedly amazed by his resignation, although he realized how good, and how necessary it was. *Thank God for Chantal, he thought, or else I'd be going back to the Enterprise and using her as a transport to get myself to a room somewhere with rubber walls. Now, instead, I can return to the ship, and my friends.*

She truly is a special lady, he thought, running a brush over his hair. She didn't have to bother with me at all, it would've given her a lot more time to enjoy herself here. Opening the drawer to replace his brush, he caught sight of something glittering. The locket, Joanna's ...

Oh, God, Kitten, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. He clutched it in his hand and shut his eyes. The upturned nose, the freckles, her face came back to him, and he knew the memories would try to punish him the rest of his life. *You wanted to die, Kitten ... at least you can rest now. What would have happened otherwise? I never would have known, and you would have spent the rest of your life letting yourself be misused because of some crazy notion that by it you'd be getting even with me. But what if ...*

It seemed madness but he thought he could practically feel his intellect taking over immediately. The survivors are obliged to live, and there will always be some way to make up for the mistakes, if not with that person then with someone else. *Can that be possible? Can I ever make up what happened to you? What I did to you?*

The young face was replaced by a more mature one, haloed with silvery hair and imperterbable green eyes. *I wonder if Chantal is ever lonely on our ship? She must be, she hasn't known any of us as long as most of us have known each other. And everyone thinks they have a good reason for not getting too close to Security ... your friend one day could be gone the next. Poor thing ... why, she's just a girl herself, really; she was a child when I visited her home world. I wonder if I ever saw her.* He tried to remember the nights around the hearthfire with Akaar but he wasn't sure if the tousel-headed blonde waif he saw was there in actuality or if he was not placing her there. *No matter, that was years ago. Life is here and now, and that waif is a very nice lady who's waiting for her dinner.*

Chantal had to admit that the vivid display of heraldic panoply impressed even her. As part of the Salute to Young Worlds in the Heritage Hall there was a colorful display of Capellan heraldry. Battle shields, weapons, coats of arms, banners, definitely displaying the basically quarrelsome and warlike nature of the feudal society arrayed the exhibition hall. Due to difficulties with the universal translating equipment, the narrated portion of the program had been converted into a series of brief lectures. The entire scene brought something new to the blonde woman clad in white, her silky hair flowing in gentle waves past her waist, as she walked arm in arm with the *Enterprise's* Chief Surgeon -- a surge of national pride. Until recently she had been extremely loathe to admit to being a part of that society of violent, emotional beings who would ride to battle at the slightest provocation, sentence a woman to die when her royal husband did because no man would be worthy enough to touch her -- indeed after having trained that woman to demand such a fate as her right. *Irrational people, she thought, and still they were, but something about the room, the vibrant colors, and the emotion they stirred made her feel at that moment quite pleased to be one of them.*

"And this is the standard of my kinsmen," she said to McCoy as they reached the central exhibit. Looming before them was the crest of the tribe of Akaar, neatly draped with the clan's colors. "It goes back nearly to the dawn of our culture, when Graafe ... his name in your language would be Graaf who made men tremble ... when he tamed the great einhorns to use as a warbeast. So it became the crest of our family. He was Akaar's grandsire seven generations past, if I remember correctly."

"The einhorn," McCoy mused, watching her enthusiasm with affection. "You know, I should've known that but for some reason I thought that ring of yours was the crest."

Chantal put her hands together at the mention of her ring, then touched it lightly with a tinted fingernail. "No," she shook her head, "this is not Cappelan. It had belonged to my father, or so Akaar told me when he gave it to me. Often I have thought to have the crest traced but the few times I have been to my sire's planet there have been other matters to take my time and so I never did."

"Your father wasn't Capellan," he reflected.

"No, he was from Alpha Centauri," Chantal allowed distantly, then tugged on her companion's arm. "Now this is the crest of the tribe of Vaar, the clan of Eleen, my kinswoman whom you know. Vaar was the strongest tribe after that of Akaar, and so my grandsire was joined with Eleen to unite them."

And so the afternoon waxed on, with Chantal plumbing the depths of her memory, as well as her imagination on occasion, as she told McCoy about her people, carefully refraining from mentioning herself whenever possible. She didn't mind, an audience of one was her favorite kind, and somehow the topic seemed so totally unrelated to her present reality that it was very comforting indeed.

"It's my turn to play the host," McCoy said as they entered his apartment. He fumbled with the light switch briefly, then took a swift appraisal of the room to ascertain that his orders to the housekeeping personnel had been followed. He wanted everything to go well tonight, extremely well. "Let me take your wrap," he said turning to her as she removed her cloak.

"You really shouldn't have bothered, Leonard," she smiled, handing over her wrap. "We could just as easily dine out."

"Now you know it's no trouble. You just place an order and everyone here is dying to wait on you. So far be it for me to deny them their small pleasures. I pushed a few buttons and had a meal sent up." He walked into the parlor where a table had been prepared and turned up the lights. "As you see, everything just as I ordered it. I swear, I think they have little elves living in the woodwork here; they take care of everything. It's terribly easy to get used to very fast."

Chantal thought briefly of the closet faerie who was forever picking up her clothes and putting them away in proper places so she couldn't find them. "Perhaps. Is there anything I can do?"

He pulled a chair from the table for her and as she sat, "Just sit and let me wait on you for a change." He picked up a bottle of wine from the table and began applying the corkscrew to it. "I've taken a few liberties," he smiled as he worked. "Gourmet etiquette dictates this be drunk at room temperature but there's something about wine that isn't chilled that just has never appealed to me, so this is," Standing at her side, he filled her glass. "Tell me what you think."

She sipped from the glass and mentally pronounced it imbibable though a bit too tart for her tastes. Caidan always teased her about her poorly educated palate for wines. "I think it'll do very nicely."

"In fact I'm not even sure if it goes with the meal but it's one I like a great deal."

"I've always felt one should temper gourmet rules with personal preferences. Etiquette, after all, is merely a means to an end, and often the means must be adjusted if the outcome is to be pleasant." She watched McCoy uncover the steaming dishes, making a mental note to check her weight when she returned to the ship. It seemed she'd done a great deal of enjoying good food while at Babel. There was much to be said for the comfort of oral gratification at times. "And I think you're about to watch me apply that rule. I've always resented the etiquette that disdains eating with one's fingers. Crab legs ... aren't they? ... virtually defy the deft use of utensils."

"They are indeed," he said as he took his own chair. "I think you'll like this, too," he reached for another dish, "although it may be a little redundant, mushrooms stuffed with crabmeat. I took you very seriously when you said you liked seafood."

"I don't mind a bit. You know it's quite difficult to come across these particular offerings since they're exclusive to Earth. Trust Babel to be prepared for all eventualities. Especially the Diplomatic Corps."

"You know, I've been wanting to ask you about that. How did we manage to get such quality quarters? I know there's a Fleet section here; I would have assumed we'd be posted there."

"Ordinarily we would have," she said, "But I had a friend intercede for us."

"That Commodore ... Caidan?"

"Yes. He's more or less permanently assigned here. These suites are reserved for various dignitaries and their staffs when at Babel. They were unoccupied when we arrived so he took the liberty of having us stay here. The food," she winked, "is much better than over in Starfleet."

"You can say that again. I'm going to miss it as much as anything else here. Prefab chow will certainly pale by comparison."

She nodded. "After spending any time on Babel I am always homesick for it when I leave."

"That reminds me, I thought Burns would be joining us today."

Chantal choked over the wine she had been sipping, tried to set down the glass, and spilled it. Still coughing, she reached for the napkin. McCoy was on his feet and rushing to her side. She cleared her throat as he patted her on the back. Then he reached for the napkin and handed it to her.

"There, are you all right?"

"Yes," she said, gasping slightly and a bit red in the face. "I ... I swallowed too much at once."

"I hope you didn't spill anything on your dress. It would probably stain such fine fabric."

She dabbed self-consciously at her skirt, then at the spilled liquid on the table. "No, I'm fine. But their linen will never be the same."

"I'm sure the Diplomatic Corps can spare one tablecloth for the cause," he said.

That was stupid, she thought, and childishly emotional. Burns had been with her mind all the day but hearing his name somehow coalesced the entire image. I have to steady my nerves somehow before we leave, I have to. It's over now, it is, and Burns has had his payment.

Resuming their dining amid a companionable silence, each entertained his own thoughts. Once having had the food placed before her Chantal realized she wasn't in the least hungry but didn't want McCoy to notice. She very carefully began removing the meat from the shells and cutting it in tiny pieces, an old trick -- when she was done she would not have eaten much but she would have looked very industrious.

"As I was saying, I was sorry Burns couldn't come," McCoy said, picking up the conversation. "I've really enjoyed his company. I'd like a chance to say goodbye before we leave." He mused, then smiled. "I'd also like to collect the money he owes me from the card game the other night."

"I'm sure he'll be in touch before we beam up," she said quietly. "Brandon is very conscientious about things like debts."

"I had a message this morning," he said. "I tried to call you but you didn't answer, then I completely forgot about it. The *Enterprise* is on her way back. In fact, she'll be in port a day early. They wanted to know if we'd be ready to leave then."

"I would think so but I won't know for certain until tomorrow." Chantal thought about her date with the psychosimulator, the results of which would determine whether or not she would be going anywhere at the end of the week. *You never know, Doctor, she thought. I could suddenly become gravely ill and unable to leave. Or just as suddenly be reassigned elsewhere. The psychosimulator ... I don't know how I'm going to do it, my nerves are shaking like the gelatinous creatures on Knoxin IV.* Burns' face came unbidden to her mind. He'd be waiting for her.

"It'll be good to go home," McCoy said reflectively. "As much as I enjoy this place, and the food, and the leisure, it'll be good to get back. You know, every time I'm gone Christine rearranges the supply cabinets and I can't find anything for weeks. I think she does it to keep me hopping, just to get me back into the routine. She's probably had the service corps come in and move the furniture this time."

Chantal offered a polite smile.

"I've wanted to tell you for a long time, I'm really glad you get along with her so well. Chris tends to keep to herself alot, too much I feel."

"Some people react that way in ship situations," Chantal considered. "Living so close, there is almost no place to go for privacy so you turn into yourself."

"Maybe so. I worry about her. That's my job, after all, I worry about all of them. No rest for the wicked," he smiled.

"I hope you do not devote too much time to worrying about me," she said, solely to maintain her side of the conversation.

"I won't tell you how much I worry about Security. But you know, after your ... your little problem ((see D&R#1 WHAT MEMORIES CAN BRING in TOSOP #2)) when you first came aboard you've done me a real service in that respect. Security casualties have been almost nil. That's helped Jim alot too. Command hadn't been very happy with the turnover in Security in our ship."

She shrugged. "We do what we can," and casually pushed her plate away.

"How was dinner?"

"I couldn't eat another bite," she countered carefully.

"Would you like a brandy?"

"Cordial, if you have it." She pushed her chair back and stood, "May I help?"

"Not a bit. I told you, tonight I'll wait on you. You go make yourself comfortable in the other room."

The parlor was not unlike the one in her own suite, she noted as she entered it, the clinking of bottles and glasses going on behind her. She took the large cushions and placed them on either side of the long low table in the center of the room, wondering absently why she always preferred pillows to chairs. *Must be the Capellan in me, she thought ... most of my people still don't have chairs.*

Settling herself comfortably she wondered suddenly what she was doing. The comfortable atmosphere of being with McCoy was ever so soothing to her. She had basked in its balm all day, and wanted to continue. *It's wrong, after listening to him last night you know it's wrong. He'll think you're encouraging him.* Indeed she had thought very little about anything that happened the night before until the episode with Burns. She had wanted to take time to consider it, but what time she had she devoted to regimenting her thought processes in order to forget what had transpired between her and the psychotech. Although she thoroughly hated to admit it, Burns had been right. Not knowing what had truly happened, McCoy was blithely assuming that she was the major contributing factor to his new state of well-being. And last night he seemed to be giving that realization a considerable amount of thought.

"Penny for your thoughts, Lieutenant," she heard him say.

Looking up she saw McCoy extended a long-stemmed glass to her. He placed his own on the table and took a seat.

She sipped carefully from the delicate glass. "I really must leave as soon as I finish this. I have an early call tomorrow and I really can't afford to oversleep again."

"But it's still early. Is there anywhere you'd like to go?" McCoy didn't want her to leave but didn't know how he wanted to express the fact. There were only two days left ... one if the *Enterprise* did arrive early. He dreaded the thought that once aboard she would turn into the super-efficient Lieutenant Caberfae who was polite enough but always held herself apart from the rest of the crew. This was the first time he had been able to come to know the woman behind the name and rank and he wished sincerely that there would be more time. There was so much more he wanted to know about her, and even more he wanted to tell her.

"Oh, no," she said, absently touching a wisp of hair at her cheek. "In all honesty I'm quite exhausted. I can't remember the last time I've socialized as much as I have since we've been here. I'm afraid efficiency ratings are going to take a sharp downward curve if I don't slow down a bit." And I don't think I want you looking at me like that any longer than I can manage, she added mentally.

"Chantal ... I don't know what to say to you. There are so many things wheeling around in my head; I don't know how they manage to balance each other." He felt mildly embarrassed. What was there about this woman that could turn a glib tongue to babbling? The eyes, green as the sea, and that smile ... she could disarm anyone. So far even Jim hadn't breached her defenses. *The natural guile of the guileless woman? What makes me think these things about her? What makes me think about any woman when Joanna's death is still so close? It's Chantal ...* "It's you in every way," he said suddenly. "I don't know how I know it, but it's you. When I try to put the pieces together, I always hear your name." He reached across the table and lightly touched her hand.

The touch to her was more closely akin to an electrical shock and she startled. She tried to pull her hand away but he wouldn't let her.

"Chantal, please, let me finish."

"I'm sorry, Leonard, I really must ..."

"No, please ..." The blue eyes implored. "I know we've never said much to each other before we came here. Mankind's curse is a lack of opportunity as well as a lack of time. But your kindness ... your concern about me when I really needed someone to give a damn. I can't get over that, I --"

"You needed help," she said without emotion, riveting her gaze on their touching hands. "I did what I had to."

"Oh, God, I don't know how to say this to you. I'm usually quite the soul of propriety, but the ship will be here in two days and ..."

"Leonard, I really must go," she said, disengaging her hand at last. She came to her feet and smoothed her dress over her hips as she went to retrieve her cape. She turned to face him and was startled to see him behind her. "I'm very sorry but I must leave."

"Chantal, I have to know. Why did you bother? You don't know me, despite the months on the ship, you really don't. Why put yourself to all this trouble?" The blue eyes steeled, hardened, and McCoy's words were slow in coming. *What is going wrong? I really thought she liked me.*

"I ... I told you." *I hate to stammer, cold blue eyes staring right through me make me stammer.* "You needed help and I thought I could do something for you. I've ... I've been extremely pleased to know that the time you've spent here has helped you."

"And that's it?"

Damn you, Brandon Burns, wasn't there any other way we could have helped him? I honestly think you like



watching me paint myself into a corner. Your warning was so casual, and you knew I was too preoccupied to take you seriously. "I'm sorry," she replied at last. "If I seemed to imply anything else, I'm sorry." She turned to go but felt a hand close on her arm. She turned to face the blue eyes that were now completely cold.

"What's the matter, Chantal? Isn't a ship's surgeon good enough? Won't you consider anyone below the rank of Commodore? Or Captain?"

The last person she cared to discuss right now was James Kirk, or her feelings about him. She looked levelly at McCoy without words.

"Is that what it is then? All part of a ploy? I saw the way your expression changed just now at the mention of his name. Do you think he'll be grateful to you now that you've helped me?"

She shook her head, her hair framing her face. "No, Leonard, that's not true. I never ..."

"Perhaps you don't ... you never feel, you never care. This is all part of a scheme to win Jim, isn't it? You'll be happy to know it's working, he's thoroughly befuddled by you. I've never seen a woman get to him the way you have."

Chantal's face couldn't help but show emotion at that revelation.

"Oh, don't worry, I'll keep your little secret. I'll keep it because I'll remember it a long time. You should be real proud of yourself, Lieutenant. The Captain will be very glad to have me whole and functional once more. I'm sure he'll be delighted to give you the credit."

Chantal understood why she hated hunting as a sport. There was no feeling like that of the prey waiting for the kill, cornered and helpless. Even the truth would not help. Telling him what transpired between her and Joanna would demand explanation she couldn't render. There was nothing to do but let McCoy retain his erroneous conclusions. Originally she had been prepared for his anger in the event that during his treatment she would have to transfer blame, but since the necessity never arose she had long since put the thought from her mind.

"If you're finished, Doctor ..."

"No, I'm not. I want to know one more thing. What makes a woman like you? How can you be so cold? Jim may be smitten with you now but he'll come to his senses, mark my words. You won't be able to hold him. He needs a woman who won't place her well-being before that of everyone else."

How easy it is for you to say that when you know nothing about last night, she thought. "Sometimes people say things they don't mean. In light of that as well as my wish to avoid it, I bid you good night, Doctor." She activated the door lock and left, not looking back until she heard the door close behind her. Pulling her cape about her she realized her tears of this morning had not been sufficient.

"Well, I certainly didn't expect to see you so early," Caidan said as he opened the door. "Are you just up, or still up?"

"May I come in?" she said and stepped past him. "A little of both. I'm in need of an ear kindly disposed to me."

"Well, you're bound to be more interesting than the Babel morning news. Have you eaten?"

She shook her head.

"I'm about to, and I'll not have you depriving me of my breakfast. It's going to be a long morning indeed. I'm in conference with Andorian representatives in two hours and since I can't come armed I'm at least going to feel well-fed." Will you join me? It won't take a minute to order more ..."

"No, I couldn't eat a thing."

Caidan, a smoking jacket over his shirt, sat down to his meal as he switched off the tabletop viewer. He had just put fork to food, then decided to look up at her. "Well, sit at least." He pondered her appearance for a brief moment as she did so. "You look quite shaken," he observed aloud, then: "Chantal, your eyes are red. Have you been crying?"

"You know me better than to expect an answer. Is the *Enterprise* on schedule?"

"You could've called Babel Control for flight information, but yes, it is, she'll put into port in the morning."

"Paul, I want a transfer to another ship," she blurted out suddenly.

"Now I know I'll never finish breakfast. Chantal, if you will reach back into the dregs of your memory you'll recall it was you yourself who selected the *Enterprise*. Now a great deal of effort has been made to give you a tight cover so you could function aboard her."

"I know all that. The background is good anywhere, can't you just get me on another starship?"

"This isn't a Monopoly game, my dear. I don't pick and choose the playing pieces."

The analogy was lost on the Capellan woman as she stared at him. "I made a mistake. The *Enterprise* is the wrong ship. I can't continue to juggle my cover and the other people and still get the job done."

"What makes you think you could handle another ship's crew?"

"Trust me, please."

"We've had this conversation before, and I trusted you then. So much so that I convinced Todmeister to trust you. If I had not done so then, perhaps we wouldn't be having this talk now. Come clean, Chantal, what's happening?"

"I ... I don't know," she said, forcing back the urge to cry. "I'm losing control of the situation. I've been working undercover for so long now, I'm starting to naturally react like a civilian, like someone who isn't an agent."

"Then I suggest you spend the rest of the day in your apartment realigning your thought processes. A transfer is out of the question in light of your report. Todmeister thinks everything is going along very well. With Kirk's nose for trouble, you're likely to find just the trouble we're looking for very soon."

"But he's part of the problem, can't you see? I think he's suspicious. And if he isn't, the Vulcan certainly is. There's no telling what he may have said to discount my validity while I've been gone and unable to defend myself."

"You sound positively paranoid. I think you and Burns have been treating the wrong person. How did you manage to do so well on psychosimulator?" He returned to his meal briefly and looked up. "I was jesting when I said that but now you do have me wondering."

Chantal felt her mind clicking over rapidly. *But I haven't been on psychosimulator*, she thought. *Unless ...* "Keeping up with the boss?" she evaded.

"Keeping one jump ahead of him," Caidan corrected. "Burns brought your scores to me yesterday."

Yesterday, she thought, *after we ...* She sighed inaudibly. *Thank you, Brandon. Even though I earned it, I would never have expected it.* "I'm sorry, Paul," she said at last, feeling his eyes on her. "It was a long night?"

"I'm sure whatever you tell me about it won't be nearly as interesting as anything I might assume, but go ahead. Tell Papa what happened."

"It's McCoy," she said, this time sighing audibly.

"I was going to ask you how that was going along."

"Quite successfully. In fact, we're finished. Burns assures me he'll be quite functional now."

"Then I don't understand the problem. He didn't find out?" Caidan, ever security-minded, was naturally apprehensive.

"No, of course not. You know me better than that as well. Burns explained it to me but I didn't take him seriously. Somehow McCoy concluded that his new sense of well-being was due to me and ..."

"And you're the one who insists there aren't men falling at your feet."

"Under normal circumstances it never would've happened. It's gratitude, that's all."

"Chantal, you're blushing like a schoolgirl."

"I'm not blushing, I'm crying," she sniffed, dabbing at her eyes with her sleeve. "Can you give me a drink?"

He gestured to the bar. "Help yourself. Isn't it a mite early?"

"It's more likely too late," she said, going to the counter. She poured three fingers of scotch over ice in a tall glass, and returned to her chair. "We had a quarrel. Well, he quarreled and I stood there nonplussed. He decided the whole thing was a plot to curry favor with Kirk."

"Was it?"

"Oh, for the love of ... You know it wasn't. You know why I had to help him. Is my English that bad? Why does everyone persist in misunderstanding me?"

Caidan looked at her, the icecubes tinkling against the glass in her trembling hand. He reached to her and put a firm hand on her wrist. "How long has it been since you've had a vacation?" he asked with total seriousness. "I mean a real one, not a shoreleave where you plied your real stock and trade."

"I don't know, really. I'm sorry, Paul. I shouldn't have bothered you. I don't usually have the luxury of someone at hand to unburden myself on. Today I do and I couldn't resist the temptation. Lately I feel I'm never off stage and you're the only one I can talk to without theatrics."

"You didn't seem so fond of me the other day."

"I know, and I'm sorry for that, too." Chantal casually wondered how much of her words were sincerity and how much dissembling. "I don't know what's the matter with me lately. I'm going to stay in today and rest, perhaps listen to some music. I think I just need to rest a bit. Please forgive me for bothering you."

"You never bother me. Or if you do, I don't mind it. We've been friends a long time."

She smiled. That was Paul Caidan, charm personified, always the right words at the right time. He could make a death sentence sound like a polite invitation. "Have I ever told you you're a very special person?" She offered her best smile, at least the best she could muster under the circumstances.

"No, and if you did, I'd wonder what you wanted. Now what was this about a transfer?"

"What a ridiculous idea when we're finally making notable progress," she quipped.

"You're learning the rest of the facts of life," Caidan suddenly thought aloud. "You haven't had a life that required you to go out of your way for someone. Remember the next time that they won't always be grateful, or at least not in the way you'll expect."

She nodded. "The only way to learn a lesson is to live it. You humans are a never-ending source of such ... lessons. I wonder how you have managed to come so far so fast."

"On behalf of the rest of my race I thank you for the backhanded compliment. Are you sure you won't have breakfast?"

"No. I think I'll fast until I return to the ship. I always feel better after a fast, however brief. Have I been cleared to return to the field?"

"Yes, as soon as Burns filed the scores with me. The *Enterprise* is going to be in deep space, after a brief stop at Aregellius, and --"

"Not another one. I don't think the Captain will allow anyone to leave the ship." She paused and thought for a moment. "Don't set it up for my sake. It's too soon after the incident with the McCoy girl. Everyone will have crawled back under their rocks for awhile."

"For better or worse it's already settled. Send word to me if something should happen, but as you say most likely nothing will. After that we'll be incommunicado for awhile. You know we still have not been able to find the double agent among us. But I will now, of that you can be certain. For that reason especially I want you to restrict your communications with us unless it's an absolute emergency, and one you can't handle."

"That's just as well. The time will be well-spent acting the part of Security Chief to the hilt." She finished the contents of the glass and pushed back her chair.

Caidan rose from his place and held the chair as she stood. Quite casually he took her arm as he walked her to the door. "I won't be able to see you off this time. I'm leaving Babel tonight with those damned Andorians, assuming the conference goes well, and it must." They paused before the door and faced each other. "Ever since you got this starship assignment I've dreaded saying goodbye to you even more than usual."

"Haven't you been reading the reports? The *Enterprise's* Security Department's efficiency ratings have improved considerably. I'm a big girl, Papa. I manage to look after myself most of the time quite well."

Caidan studied her face, wondering if he did indeed notice minute lines around her eyes. The face had never changed, or so it seemed to him, not since the first day he saw it so many years before. He had been present at the onset of every assignment, basking in the glory of his protege. She had done well for herself, and for him, and had never given him cause to worry until the day she talked him into the starship assignment. Try as he could, he couldn't shake the feelings of foreboding about that job. But she was a very capable agent and an extremely resourceful woman. There really was no need to worry about her over much. She never let him down. Thinking of her unswerving loyalty not so much to the company but to the job she had volunteered to do, to find the Target and stop him, he thought she would willingly die before she'd fail. That thought was causing him more concern than usual. "Yes," he said finally. "I daresay you do."

She looked at him, unable to discern the look on his face. On impulse, she reached out and touched his cheek very lightly. "Thank you, Paul ... for everything."

Without further word, she turned and left.

The day of fasting had been easily kept since Chantal elected to sleep through most of it. The next morning her intercom sounded early to announce the arrival of the *Enterprise*. She dressed immediately, feeling oddly at home in her uniform for a change, and began packing. Off and on she toyed with the idea of placing a call to McCoy but she couldn't think of anything to say -- besides, she knew he would have been informed of the ship's arrival. There would be time enough to face him later. Packing completed, she

ordered a carafe of black coffee and upon its arrival proceeded to drink three cups as she called upon her training and began to assemble her thoughts and feelings.

At the precise hour, she left her apartment and was greeted by one of the Diplomatic Corps service people who offered to carry her duffle to the beam-up point. As they walked -- she preferred stretching her legs to taking an electricart -- she was met by another attendant who handed her a sealed note. Pausing to one side of the corridor she broke the seal with her thumbnail and read it. The handwriting was virtually illegible, but also most familiar. In an elaborate scrawl were the simple words "Remember, girl, no human condition is ever permanent." There was no signature, it didn't need one. Chantal replaced the slip of paper in its envelope and tucked it into her bag. She was prepared to face Kirk, she had no time to truck with thoughts of Brandon Burns.

"Dr. McCoy has been detained, Lieutenant," the transporter operator told her.

She took her bag from the attendant who had struggled valiantly to both carry it and maintain a pace with her long strides, and slung it on one of the transporter pods.

"We can beam you up now or you can wait."

"Now, if you please." She wondered why Fate was making it so simple for her to avoid McCoy.

"As you wish, Lieutenant. Take your place, please."

She mounted the transporter pad and positioned herself carefully, her hands clenched at her sides. She closed her eyes, never liking the process of beaming, of not being anyone for even an infinitesimal amount of time.

When she opened her eyes, the familiar colors of the *Enterprise's* transporter room seemed to call out a greeting. She blinked, resisting the urge to make sure all of her was there, and reached for her bag.

"Welcome back, Lieutenant," the transporter chief said. "Can I call someone to help you with your bag?"

"No, thank you, Mr. Kyle. I can manage quite well." As she stepped from the pad she saw Kirk come through the transporter room doors. *Thank you, Fate, there's the Devil and the Deep, and you give me the devil without so much as a "by your leave"*. She realized she should have waited for McCoy. He and his friend would no doubt have had so much to say to each other that she could have slipped away to her quarters virtually unobserved.

Approximately six feet of space stood between them and Chantal thought they must've resembled two catbeasts as they stood there, virtually trying to sniff out each others' moods.

"The Doctor has been delayed," she said, deciding to break the silence. "He'll beam up presently." She tried to seem inobtrusive as she looked at the Captain. He seemed to have changed and that seemed impossible over a mere two weeks. He looked very tired.

Kirk was happy for the amount of space between them because it meant he didn't have to look up at her. Perhaps it was an omen: always keep this woman at a distance. Even trying to not think about her meant he was thinking about her. "How is he?" he asked simply, appreciative of the existence of a neutral topic of conversation.

"I think you will be very pleased with the results of his sojourn," she said with modified politeness. "He is quite well. While it is true that there are some things about his daughter's death that he will never be completely healed of, I think you will find that he is quite himself and able to function."

Kirk's entire body seemed to sag with relief. "Thank God. How did you do it?"

"I ... I don't ..."

"Bridge to Captain," the intercom called in a familiar voice.

This time it was Chantal's turn to feel the breath of relief. Kirk shrugged and went to the unit on the wall. "Kirk here. What is it, Lieutenant?"

"Captain, you're needed on the bridge. Mr. Spock has the data coming in now on ..."

"On my way," Kirk said, sorry for being abrupt with Uhura who really didn't deserve it. He turned and looked at the woman who seemed to be studying him intently.

"Tell the Doctor I'll see him in Sickbay as soon as they give me five free minutes." He turned and walked to the doors which opened when he triggered the sensing mechanism. He paused and turned back to Chantal who had bent to pick up her bag. "Lieutenant ..."

"Sir?" She wondered what he would say, particularly in front of Kyle. She appreciated the shield even an audience of one provided.

"I just ... I just wanted to say thanks," he said simply, making a vague gesture with his hands.

"I'm ... I'm glad I was able to help, sir." She smiled, hopefully.

Quite surprised, he reacted with a smile that was totally unplanned, then left.

She turned once more to her dufflebag and as she hoisted it she heard a tearing sound. Before she could manage to clutch the bag with both hands, the lacings broke, the bag dropped, and the contents began to litter the floor. She looked at Kyle and gave him a resigned shrug, then knelt to begin to restore order. As she did so she heard the transporter activating and she knew she would never be finished before McCoy arrived. The Devil and the Deep ... Fate was running true to course.

McCoy, always prone to checking to make sure he was all there, stepped from the transporter and smiled gingerly to Kyle. "I'm going right to Sickbay," he announced, stopping before he reached Chantal. "I'll send someone for my luggage later."

Having managed to put her possessions back into a container much too small she worked somewhat futilely at fastening it again. McCoy, she knew, had stopped and seemed to be waiting for her to say something.

"Need some help, Lieutenant?" he said softly.

She forced herself to look up. "No ... I think I can manage. The lacing broke. It's been worn thin and I've just never remembered to replace it." She tied two more knots to keep it closed and decided she'd have to resign herself to carrying it some other way than over her shoulders. Why was he waiting for her?

"Can I give you a hand with that?"

"No, really. I can manage."

"Chantal ..." He touched her shoulder in hopes she would finally face him. It wasn't easy to be contrite in front of someone like her ... *dammit, in front of anyone, really. But when you're wrong, you're wrong, and you might as well tell them you know it.*

She looked into his face at last and the blue eyes had softened considerably since the last time she did so. "Yes, Doctor?"

"Chantal ... about the other night." He looked uneasily over his shoulder at Kyle who seemed to be totally unaware of their presence anymore. "I'm ... I'm sorry. I really am. I don't know what made me say what I did. I didn't mean it and I can't tell you how sorry I am, after all you've done ..."

"Doctor, really, you don't have to apologize." Relief swept over her like a wave of water. She couldn't fully comprehend why she felt so much better beyond the unexplainable truth that she couldn't bear to think he hated her.

He shook his head. "No, I really do."

"The matter's completely forgotten."

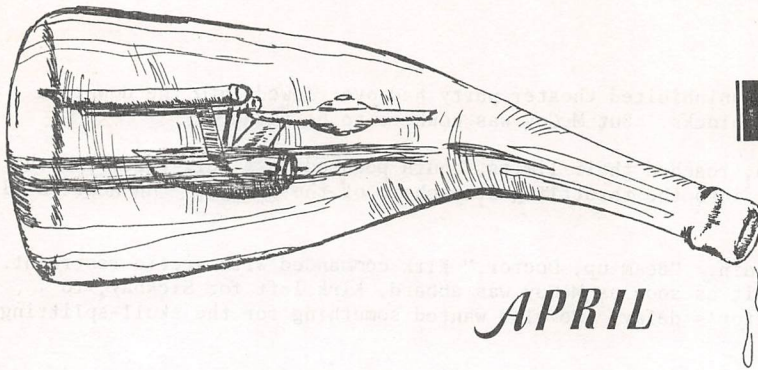
He extended a hand to her. "Friends?"

She took his hand between hers, marveling at the warmth in his grasp. Nodding, she smiled. "The Captain" she began, "said he was very sorry to be unable to greet you. No sooner did he get here than he was called back to the Bridge. He said he would come to Sickbay later."

McCoy nodded. "Now I know we're home. Time, and the *Enterprise*, wait for no one."

As McCoy left Chantal lifted her bag once more, this time awkwardly in two arms, solemnly resolving to pack considerably less the next time she went anywhere at all. She stepped into the hallway and began her trip to the turbolift, nodding acknowledgement to those who called to her. She noted again how strangely at home she felt as she looked at the polished hallway. The embrace of the *Lady Enterprise* ... Perhaps this was what Kirk felt when he strode her halls, she thought absently. *It makes sense for him, it is his ship, I'm only an interloper.* Still, Burns' words echoed in her mind ... and she knew there was more than a grain of truth in the fact that no human condition was truly ever permanent.





LOGJAM

APRIL

PENTLAND



aptain James T. Kirk was as unhappy as any crew member at having his long-overdue, forty-eight hour leave cut short, especially for something as mundane as ferrying a colony of etymologists to their rendezvous with the mission-ship *Esperanza*. But their survey ship *Circe* had blown her centrifugal generators, and interstellar shipping schedules being what they were, the *Enterprise* was drafted as the only ship handy to provide transport for this leg of their journey.

He had beamed up to the ship with admirable alacrity, considering the promising situation he had left behind at Sarah's party, and found himself hip-deep in red tape and petty bureaucracy even before he had the chance to change into his uniform. In the few moment's respite that changing allowed him, he decided that Polonius N'Tapee, the head of the science team, could give Nils Baris a close race for the title of Pompous Ass of the Known Galaxy. He found himself agreeing with the man on one point, however: the team must be delivered to the *Esperanza* as quickly as possible. Not because of the scientific importance of the swarm on Damascene, but because his own sanity was in serious peril as long as Mr. N'Tapee remained aboard.

Once on the bridge, Kirk discovered that his tolerance and diplomacy were to be tested more thoroughly than he cared to think about. They could not leave orbit. One of his senior officers had not returned from shore leave and could not be contacted. Kirk considered leaving anyway. Spock, Scott, all the vital bridge personnel were at their posts. Even if the ship could not return to pick up the officer until after its next mission, ridding the *Enterprise* of Mr. N'Tapee and his hive could be considered a crucial enough reason for leaving one crew member behind. Then Kirk realized that he had not heard a single comment of lethal, sanity-giving sarcasm directed at the Pompous Ass and knew, before Uhura gave him the name, who was missing. Bones was not aboard.

"One hour, Lieutenant," Kirk ordered. "Keep trying to reach him." He did not need to suggest the kind of places to call. She was aware of the Doctor's tastes, and knew, by reputation or by experience, all of the more exotic bars and clubs on the base.

To Mr. N'Tapee's hysterical objections, Kirk replied with laudable equanimity that the ship could not be considered space-worthy without its chief medical officer. He wondered, in the short periods of sanity between bureaucratic attacks, if a man's personality determined his career. N'Tapee seemed predestined to study insects, parasites, and other forms of pests. He was like a mosquito, buzzing and whining about the bridge; a nagging, elusive nuisance with an aggravating sting.

Even Spock did not try to reason with the little man that the swarm of honey-locusts on Damascene was a curiosity rather than a threat, and that the study of their migratory habits was scarcely an emergency priority. The only member of the bridge crew who remained unaffected by the excoriating presence was Uhura, who was obviously enjoying the search for the Doctor. Kirk could overhear her repressed giggles and snatches of conversation as she traced McCoy's progress through the wilder establishments of Port Sayed. Someone had let loose an Aldebaran wallaby in the

kitchen of the El Morocco, and an uninhibited theater party had overflowed into the downtown section, tying up traffic for six blocks. But McCoy was nowhere to be found.

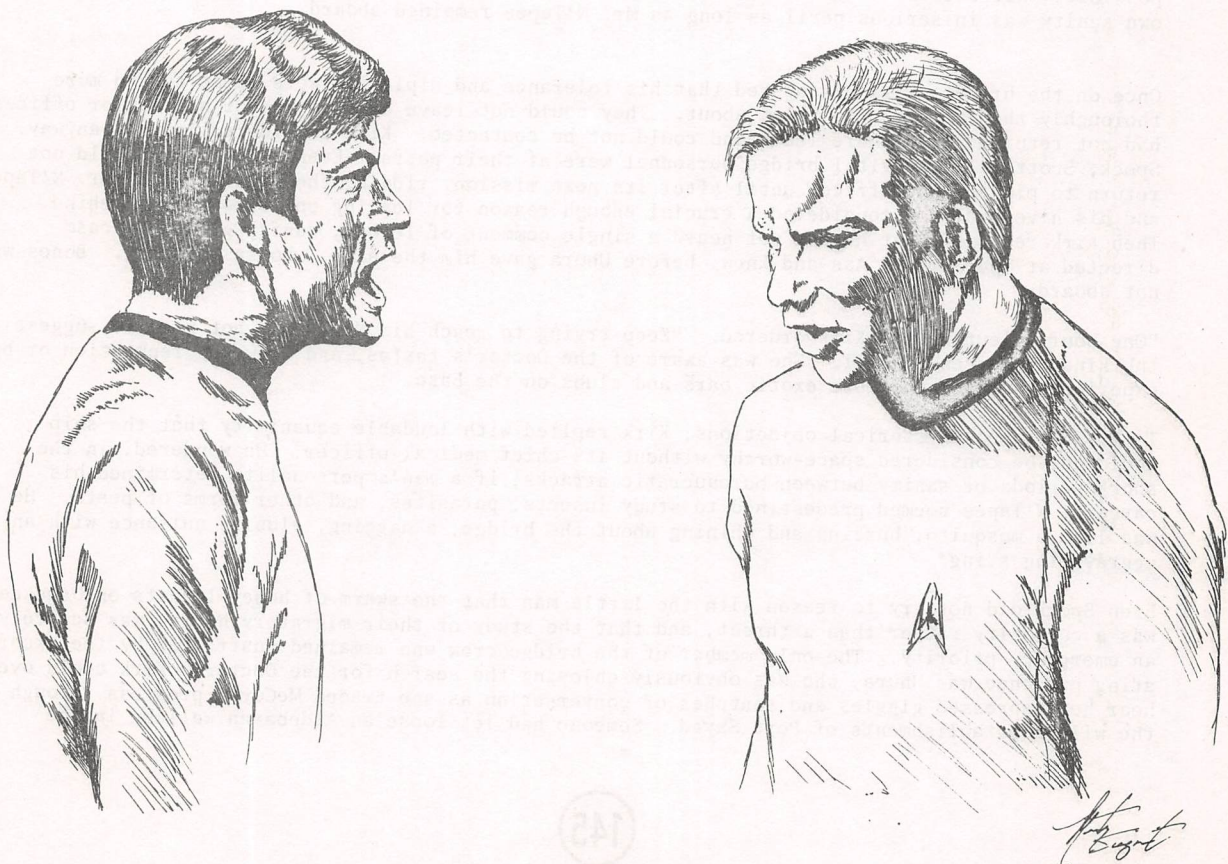
As the hour, and Kirk's endurance, reached their limits, Uhura pounced on a tell-tale, and the accents of Georgia drifted lazily into the throttling atmosphere of the bridge. "Ah hear ya'll been lookin' for me, Lieutenant."

Uhura was spared the need to explain. "Beam up, Doctor," Kirk commanded with arctic restraint. After issuing orders to leave orbit as soon as McCoy was aboard, Kirk left for Sickbay, to extract an explanation of the Doctor's delay. He also wanted something for the skull-splitting headache he had developed.

McCoy had imbibed a sufficient quantity of synthesized Trova to be benevolently expansive and totally oblivious to Kirk's mood. "Why, Ah was at the art museum, Jim-Boy. That's why you couldn't reach me. The security dome, y'see ...". He doled out a couple of pills and handed them unceremoniously to the Captain. "I had a small wager with a charmin' young lady named Paddy that the statue of Kannon had eleven heads. She said it had twelve."

Kirk was not paying much attention, occupied as he was with finding a glass of water to wash down the pills. McCoy continued reflectively, "It had eleven heads. Not that I'll be able to collect the stakes now ...".

Kirk downed the pills without water, inhaled deeply to reassure himself that he was not losing touch with reality, and turned to McCoy. "Doctor, your esthetic acumen does not interest me in the least. You are responsible for a delay in the response of this ship to an order from Starfleet. As a senior officer, you are required to remain available to the ship at all times. You have been negligent in your duty, and in my opinion, are unfit to remain at your post!"



Before the unexpected barrage of authority, McCoy was silent for a full minute. "Unfit!" he rasped finally, eyes blazing.

"Unfit for duty by reason of drunkenness, Doctor, and so it will be entered in my official log, unless you confine yourself to your quarters immediately!"

McCoy might have been slightly drunk, but his response could not be laid to alcohol; rather to the fact that he was now madder than hell. "Since when has your official log become your precious super-ego, Captain?!" he roared.

The increased decibel level did nothing for Kirk's throbbing head. "You're bucking for a charge of insubordination, Doctor!"

"Insubordination?!"

"Insubordination!!"

Spock, who understood human nature better than he would ever admit, had appeared in the doorway. McCoy did not notice him as he turned to Kirk, fists clenched at his sides, his voice quietly acid. "Only a brass-bound, tin-plated, petty tyrant ..."

He never finished the sentence. Kirk took one purposeful step toward him, but Spock got there first. Under the nerve-pinch, McCoy slumped into the Vulcan's arms. Kirk's face did not soften. "Get him to his cabin, Spock." He turned and left.

So the most rational member of the crew was not with Kirk to advise restraint as the Captain stalked back to the bridge and added five words to his official log: "Doctor McCoy was drunk today."

The journey continued in strained silence. McCoy had appeared on the bridge early on the next shift of duty, showing no sign of a hangover, but smiling and sheepish, prepared to offer a full apology and explanation of his conduct. But his curiosity led him to confer with Uhura before he spoke to Kirk, and she gently confirmed that the Captain had carried out his threat. The words were in the Captain's log. And once recorded, the contents of the log could not be altered.

McCoy's chin came up, and he walked stiffly from the bridge without further comment. Kirk, his back carefully turned to the elevator, pretended not to notice. He had begun to regret his action, but it could not be undone. Only Spock was aware of the silent support that went with the man who had left.

The rift between the Captain and Doctor went largely unnoticed while N'Tapee's bug-men, whose influence roughly approximated the psychological equivalent of poison ivy, were aboard. Spock noted that it became very easy to identify crew members who had come into contact with the specialists. The symptoms were tightly clenched jaw muscles and barely suppressed impulses to smash things. It was fortunate that there were few breakable objects on the ship. Kirk was not aware of the epidemic of raw nerves, since he had been one of its first victims. Because of his impairment, and because of Vulcan reserve, the crew could not hope for relief from either Spock or the Captain.

But McCoy, in his self-imposed exile from the bridge, had ample opportunity to observe the affliction, and possessed the ingenuity to devise an antidote and the authority to administer it. The treatment was composed of equal parts red-tape, myopic attention to trivia, and computer error.

The etymologists were surprised to learn that, by strict interpretation of Starfleet regulations, they were required to submit to thorough physical examinations. They were further amazed when the examinations revealed that each was the victim of a rare, unpronounceable, highly infectious aberration of the cutifying plastocenes. They were quarantined. They were subjected to exhaustive tests, placed on insipidly limited diets, and dosed with little, bitter pills. Then their records were found to be inaccurate, the diagnosis incorrect, and the whole process began again, only worse. Mr. N'Tapee learned, painfully, that while it might be injudicious to meddle with a Starship Captain, no one could make one's daily life more miserable than the Ship's Medical Officer.

The crowning achievement of McCoy's campaign came in the request broadcast over the ship's intercom, after the chief bug-man had apparently sought sanctuary in a utility closet: "Mr. Entropy,

Mr. Felonious Entropy, please report to Sickbay for your series of gastro-intestinal tests, and please bring with you the necessary specimen."

It was a shame that McCoy could not hear the laughter that exploded through the ship as working routine; with it the accumulated tensions of the past days dissolved into liberated hilarity. Except on the bridge, where no one dared laugh, because the Captain did not. Spock did not need to look at Kirk to know that his stony silence was the result of a severe repression of natural instincts; the struggle was apparent in the faces of the other officers present.

With the dispatch of the specialists, complete with butterfly nets, to the care of the *Esperanza*, the rest of the crew relaxed into routine. But the silence between Kirk and McCoy continued, straining the efficiency of those that worked with them, until Spock was compelled to provide an incentive for reconciliation.

He entered the professional stillness of McCoy's office and launched into his argument without preamble. "Doctor, I do not presume to intrude upon your field of expertise. But I am a respecter of facts, and as illogical as human behavior may be, it is a fact of existence. As such, it is a dangerous thing to meddle in. I do so only because the alteration of the relationship between yourself and the Captain is beginning to affect your working performances. If only in the interest of the ship's continued efficiency, something must be done to either repair the misunderstanding or to redefine your positions."

"You mean you want me to apologize, Spock?"

"It would be illogical to expect the Captain to explain or amend any action he took as part of his official capacity. As commanding officer, he cannot be expected to apologize for his actions, however much he may regret them personally."

"Does he?"

"I do not attempt to read minds, Doctor. But judging from his past behavior, I would assume that if he were completely satisfied with the results of the altercation, he would have so informed you, in very definite terms, several days ago."

"So as his subordinate, it's my obligation to make the first move." McCoy's sympathy with Kirk's position moved him to pace uncomfortably across the room. But there was also something called pride.

"Damn it all, Spock, I'm more sorry about what happened than he is. I was ready to apologize the next day. But he put it in the ship's log. It's part of my permanent record now. How would you like something like that entered into your official files?"

"If you will reflect, Doctor, on occasion there have been entered into my records considerably more defamatory observations, by yourself and by the Captain. They were, as is the entry regarding your condition on the evening in question, statements of fact. It is impossible to appeal to or to deny facts."

McCoy regarded him sadly. "You know, Spock, sometimes I think life must be very dull for you. All your dedication and accumulation of facts is rather pointless, isn't it? Like a huge mathematical equation that automatically cancels out to zero, since the final fact is that we're all going to die anyway, eventually. Anything that happens to us along the way is just a random fact to be added in, but it doesn't change the answer."

The veiled stillness of the Vulcan's face was, though McCoy did not know it, the equivalent of an indulgent smile. "I presume that you are arguing, Doctor, in your typically erratic way, for the 'Meaning' of life. It may surprise you to know that I agree. Facts are inescapable. They are also meaningless without the intelligence to discern and evaluate their significance. Such is the case with the Captain's log entry. As a fact, it is absolute. As correlated with the rest of your estimable history, it will mean nothing at all."

McCoy stopped pacing. Not for the first time, he profoundly regretted the barricade of formality that he and Spock had erected between them. He would have liked very much to have been able to thank his friend.

Spock moved to the door. "In my judgement, it would be a grave error to jeopardize a beneficial and practical relationship on the basis of such an irrelevancy. Facts can be vital, or totally worthless. You would do well to re-evaluate your appreciation of them, Doctor, and to understand their uses."

McCoy smiled ruefully as the door closed behind the Vulcan. He would never understand why Spock had to compensate for every expression of understanding by reverting to bloody boorishness. But the Doctor's mind was also occupied with an idea suggested by Spock's last comment, a simple, logical idea that would achieve a gentle revenge and reduce the episode to the absurdity it deserved.

McCoy's method of apology was as direct as his surgical technique. He appeared at the door to Kirk's cabin with a bottle of brandy and his most charming smile.

"I promise not to drink myself into oblivion if you'll join me, Jim."

Kirk's answering smile was immediate and genuine. "Come on in, Bones."

McCoy apologized, officially and personally. And, as the Doctor knew he would, Kirk dismissed both as unnecessary. The days of silence were forgotten, and they shared brandy and conversation with the ease of long friendship.

Some time later, as McCoy rose to leave, Kirk brought up the matter that had remained unmentioned between them. "Bones, about that log entry ..."

So much, thought McCoy, for the Vulcan idea of dignity. He could have told Spock that a man of James Kirk's character and intelligence did not become the most dynamic commander in Starfleet by worrying about his image. He kept his smile to himself as Kirk continued.

"If I'd waited a few more minutes for the pills to work, I wouldn't have made it. But it's part of the record now ..." He paused, the concern visible in his face. "Bones, you must know that one entry like that doesn't mean a damn thing."

"Of course I do, Jim. And I'm glad to know you feel that way, too." McCoy could no longer control his smile or the devilment in his eyes. "That will make it easier for you. Good-night, Jim. Sleep well."

He was gone before Kirk could voice the question: "Make *what* easier for me?"

Kirk's curiosity had to wait until the next turn of duty. He entered the bridge to find Uhura sitting dazedly at her console, trying to decide whether to be shocked or tickled. Beside her, Spock wore the stunned expression of a man who had found a nova in his teacup. Neither seemed prepared to offer an explanation.

With Vulcan resignation, Spock began, "Lieutenant Uhura has just brought to my attention a rather ... unusual entry in the Doctor's official medical log."

He stopped as the lift doors opened and the culprit strolled over and asked sweetly, "Anything wrong, Mr. Spock?"

The flatness of Spock's voice might have been meant as a warning. "We were reviewing the most recent entry in your medical log, Doctor."

"In my log? My official log?" McCoy's face was seraphic. "Is the entry in error, Mr. Spock? Or inaccurate?"

"No, Doctor. But ..."

"Then there can't be any problem, can there? A simple statement of fact, Mr. Spock."

Spock's face looked almost bleak. "Yes, Doctor."

Kirk had the feeling that his grasp of the situation was slipping. "Let's hear it, Lieutenant."

Uhura looked helplessly at Spock, who began, "Captain ..."

"*Right now*, Lieutenant."

"Aye, Sir," she murmured, and flipped the switch.

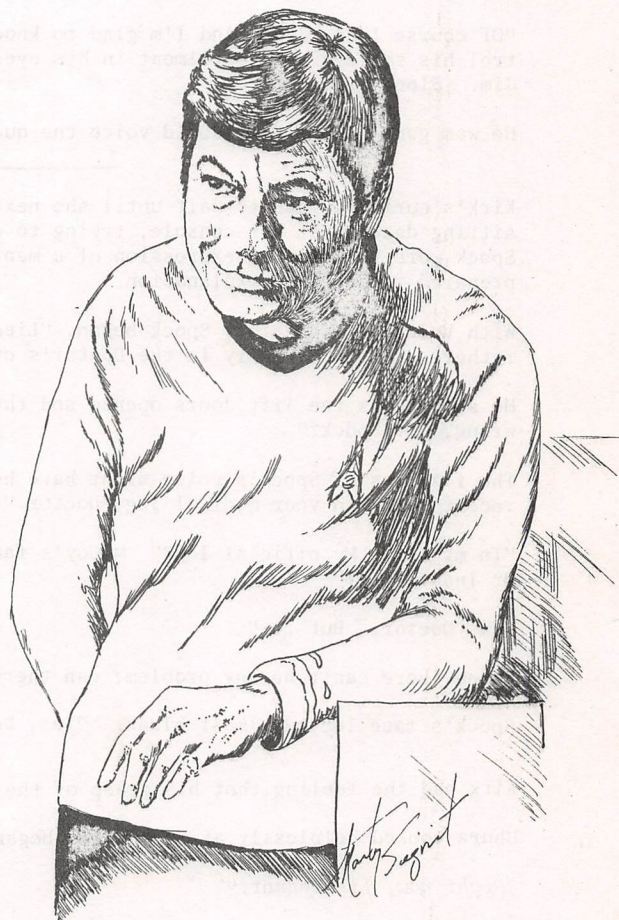
McCoy's entry had done the Captain's better by one word, and a whole galaxy of implications. It reported succinctly: "Captain Kirk was *not* drunk today."

The bridge crew froze in their places as the connotations of the log entry sank in. Kirk turned to the innocent face of his chief medical officer and opened his mouth. What came out was a helpless giggle. The Captain of the *Enterprise* chuckled. He snickered. He chortled. He threw back his head and laughed out loud. Then he ran out of breath and leaned weakly against the railing.

"Oh. Oh. Oh, Bones ..." he finally gasped. "How ... ? How ... ?"

As the only officer on the bridge who retained a straight face, Spock attempted to deny any connection with the merriment. "It was entirely the Doctor's own idea. Amazingly logical, considering the source." And watched in total bewilderment as the officers erupted into fresh hilarity.

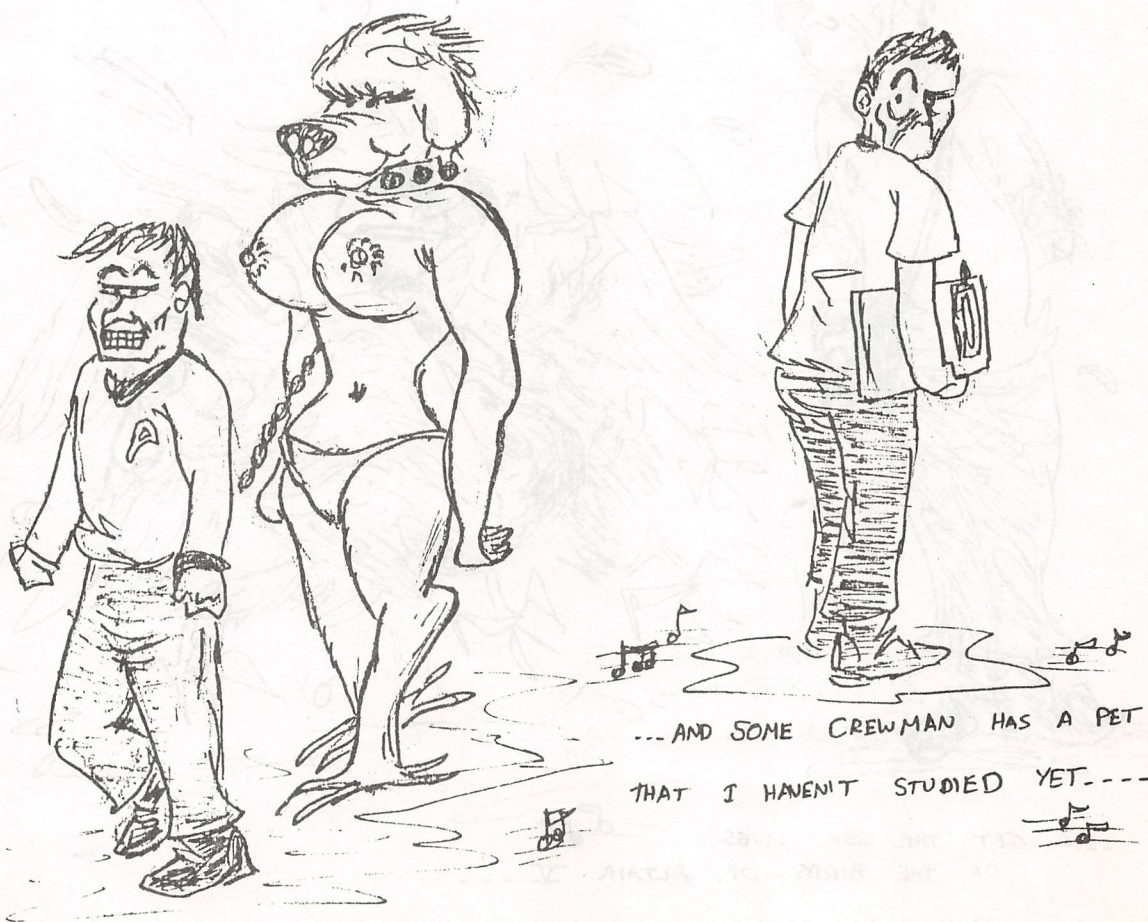
Kirk crossed to McCoy and shook him feebly by the shoulders. "Doctor, it was brilliantly done, and I concede the victory to you. But, Bones," the attempt at severity dissolved into husky laughter, "we're going to drive the record-keepers at Starfleet crazy!"



BONES by Leslie Fish

artwork by R. Schultz

This song was originally recorded on *Folksongs for Folks Who Ain't Even Been Yet*, an album that has got to be one of the best examples of fannish creative endeavor going today. The words to "Bones" and the other songs on the record have been previously printed in *PEGASUS* (edited by Melissa Bayard and Jan Rigby), *SOL PLUS III* (edited by Jackie Bielowicz), and *THE OTHER SIDE OF PARADISE* (edited by Signe Landon and Amy Falkowitz).



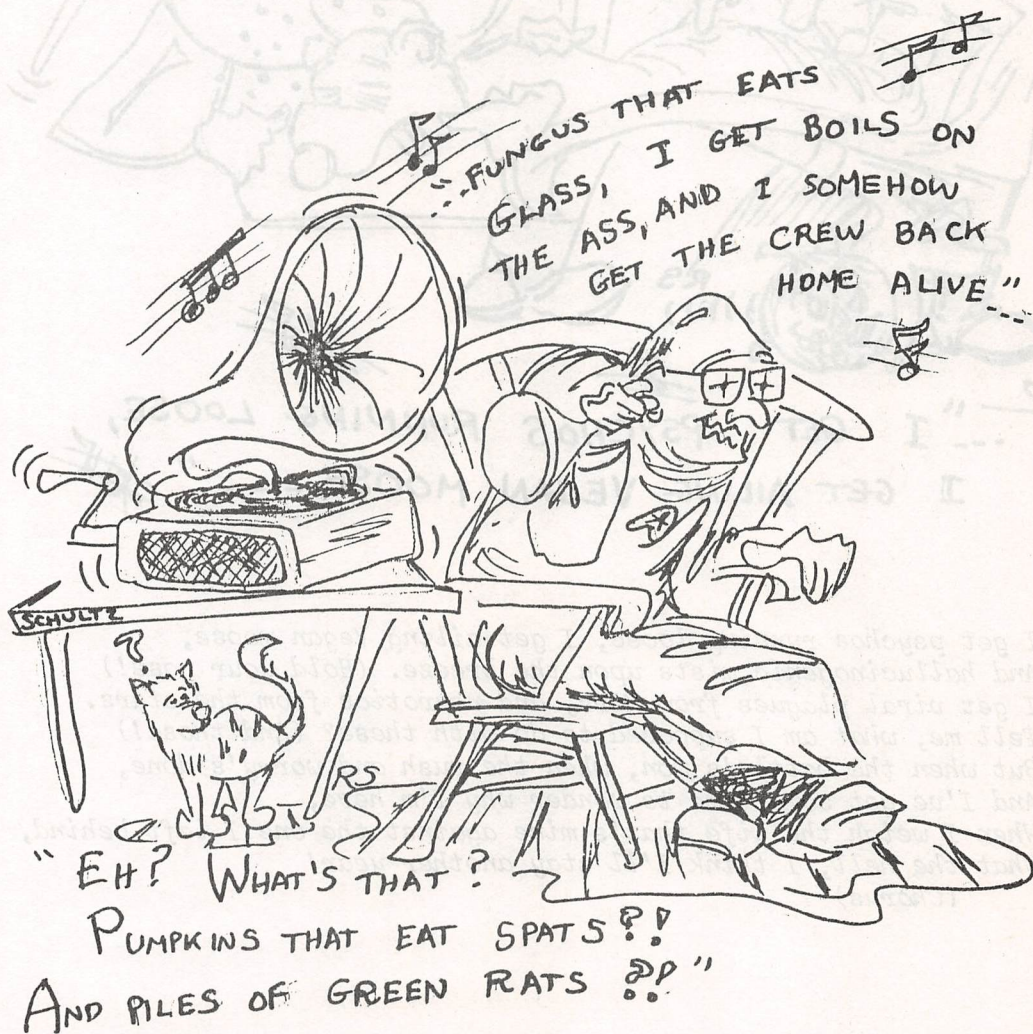
Oh, I could have worked on a research staff.
 I could have been stationed on the sea,
 Or dug a cozy niche in diseases of the rich,
 But that wasn't good enough for me. (Oh, no!)
 I was tired of the land of diseases that were bland,
 And some troubles that I didn't care to face.
 So, now I wake each morning to the intercom's warning
 And I wonder why I ever went to space.

Chorus: Oh, there's aches and pains, and wounds and sprains,
 And a space-borne plague or two;
 So I'll do my best, I'll run another test,
 And pour myself another mug of brew. (Thank you!)



... I GET THE SEX LIVES
 OF THE BIRDS OF ALTAIR V ...

Now I serve a starship's crew, with a million things to do
 And a headache that I really can't afford, (named Spock!)
 And some crewman's got a pet that I haven't studied yet —
 Well, at least I must admit I'm never bored! (Just in shock!)
 Half the calls I receive Mayo Clinic won't believe:
 I get sex lives of the birds from Altair V,
 I get fungus that eats glass, I get boils on the ass,
 And I somehow get the crew back home alive.
 (Chorus)





I get psychos running loose, I get ailing Vegan moose,
And hallucinogenic mists upon the breeze. (Hold your nose!)

I get viral plagues from Mars, and neurotics from the stars.
Tell me, what am I supposed to do with these? (And those!)

But when the battle's won, when the rush and worry's done,
And I've got some time to wonder why I'm here,
When I weigh the life that's mine against the one I left behind,
What the hell, I think I'll stay another year!

(Chorus)



STAR TREK Slurpee Cup #3: Leonard "Bones" McCoy, Senior Medical Officer -
USS Enterprise

"I heal 'em all, rich or poor, Captain or ensign, 'cause it's my job. I chose a star ship to practice on 'cause I've got deep, dark, mysterious sadness in my past that I'm runnin' away from.

"Atlanta's my birthplace, Finagle's Folly's my drink (although brandy will do in a pinch), and Orions Do It In Quads is the last book I read.

"My favorite declaration is that I'm a doctor, not a _____ and my favorite pronouncement is 'He's dead, Jim.' Aside from weekly red alerts life is pretty cozy, and if it weren't for certain pointy-eared, green-blooded first officers life'd be peachy keen."

